

Lawrence G. Green

South African Beachcomber



SOUTH AFRICAN BEACHCOMBER

Memories of the people of the shore and the stories they told; sand and dunes and treasure, seabirds and creatures of the sea; and personal impressions of certain islands in African waters

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Timber from wrecks.

Simonstown still hides many secrets.

Hauling a whale ashore.

Whaling enjoyed many prosperous years.

The cannon weighing six thousand pounds was hauled up on the beach.

You will find the wrecks and legends of wrecks.

One ship fetched £20 at auction

The 'great gale' in which eighteen ships were lost.

The Brutus was heavily battered.

You can still find the bones of the Kakapo.

Some wrecks became landmarks for years.

The cast-iron lighthouse tower was bolted together on Dassen Island.

Sharks never bite unless they are molested.

Smith kept an expert eye on the fish market.

The clock presented by Queen Victoria.

"One Boat", a landmark.

The Peak of Teneriffe.

Las Palmas: the atmosphere is more African.

A strong man is Palomo

That little girl: the voice of a nightingale.

The quiet anchorage that Columbus loved.

No ordinary aircraft has ever landed on Gomera

The most charming hotel in the world.

Much of the wine comes to the cellars in goatskins.

Chapter 1
BEACHCOMBER

*Across the narrow beach we flit,
One little sand-piper and I;
And fast I gather, bit by bit,
The scattered drift-wood bleached and dry.*

Celia Loughton Thaxter

NEARLY ALL my life I have lived by the sea. Framed in my window is a wide expanse of South Atlantic, and this gives me peace of mind. When I bought five acres inland some years ago, planting fruit trees and vines, I really did not know what I was doing. Now my balcony is so close to the sea that I could throw a stone on to the beach where a coaster was wrecked a few years ago.

Once I owned a cottage at Blaauwberg Strand, on the far side of Table Bay, a little white strandhuisie that was too close to the sea. With a roaring north-west gale one winter's night came high spring tide, so that a great wave crashed through the front door, burst into the kitchen, and put out the fire in the coal-stove. My neighbour's stoep collapsed. No doubt I was lucky, and it has never happened again.

I paid less than four hundred pounds for that cottage

and I was a fool to sell. There I was a beachcomber indeed, walking barefooted at all hours and in all weathers over the hard sands on the northern shore of Table Bay; walking on the gleaming wet sands and the soft dunes. I still wander along that beach every week, beyond the little village of thatch and lime-washed walls. The white cottage I sold is still waiting there in the moonlight, and perhaps it is waiting for me.

Every tide on that long beach washes romance in my path. Wood smoke from the cottage fires sets my mind working. There, too, is the breath of the early morning sea, sharp as a razor's edge, when the dark sky shivers and the stars go out and the sun breaks warmly over the dunes. In winter there is the foam billowing and drifting up to the doors of the houses on the beach. Ah, those north-west gales that come thundering in from deep water to lash and pound the long beaches; there is power for you, and a fierce beauty.

On that beach you may feel the old spell of Africa and the waters of Africa, the wonders and the life and sometimes the drama. It is a virgin beach beyond the houses, the same young world that the Strandlopers knew, and the Dutch explorers who

marched northwards from their little fort, keeping their weapons ready.

Along the tidemarks the refuse of the sea lies drying. Here is a seed that has crossed the ocean all the way from the West Indies, one of those “sea beans” that primitive natives hang round their necks as charms against illness. Those were the seeds that drifted on to the coast of Portugal in the days of Columbus, giving learned men the idea that new land might be found across the ocean. So I never miss the beach drift along the tidemarks.

I have read some grand menus, thrown overboard from ships; and all sorts of unexpected things come to rest on the fringe of the sea. Once there was a woman’s coat, a sodden fur-coat. Was she in a rage when she threw it overboard? Another time there was a small keg of butter, absolutely sound. And a sun helmet, sold by Simon Arzt of Port Said. And a new calabash pipe, after I had given up smoking. On a flood tide came a dancing shoe, gliding in with the stately rhythm of a minuet.

Every day is different on this beach. Twice I saw sea-elephants hauling up on shore after swimming a thousand miles from sub-Antarctic islands. Often I

have watched dolphins, and a great sight it is when the dolphin appears in a wave curling over before it breaks, like a tiny whale in brilliant green amber with the sun making a silhouette of it. Offshore you may sight the vapour of the blue whale, the largest creature that has ever lived on this planet; and you may think of the men who hunted whales in open boats from many bays along the South African coast.

All the sea birds have flown over this beach or alighted here, from the albatross to the little sand-plover. Lie down in the lee of a dune, close your eyes, and when you awake the birds will be there and unaware of you. I watched a pair of sand plovers teetering round their two stone-coloured eggs, pecking at such delicacies as land insects and invisible sea creatures. One bird dragged a wing when it saw me, in an effort to draw my gaze from the shallow sand nest where the eggs lay. In the spring I found a gannet lying dead among the flowers, wings outspread. It was a picture for a painter.

As for fish, I can recall many strange encounters. Long ago the Blaauwberg fishermen cut the jaws out of a man-eating shark they had hooked after it

had attacked their boat, and they presented me with some of the teeth. Queer fish have come to light on these shores, as I shall tell you. But the most unusual scene, I think, came about when the greedy seals chased thousands upon thousands of *marsbankers* into rocky pools on the coast to the north of Melkbosch Strand. Everyone in that village turned out with baskets, caught the fish by the hundred and carried them home alive.

On the Cape beaches you may still meet a few old men whose grandfathers were fishing there when the Batavian Republic ruled the land. Fishing has been transformed in our time. I can remember, as many of you can remember, the days when the open boats, Fatima and Johanna and the rest, came thrashing home under huge spritsails. Hardly an engine in the fleet, but they were superbly handled. Those twenty-foot open boats might work thirty or forty miles out at sea. Sometimes they sold their snoek in Rogge Bay at a few pence apiece; elf at a penny each on the Kalk Bay sands. But they were sailor men. They loved the wind, and when they woke at dawn and heard a steady breeze strumming over their cottages they would smile and say: "Good morning, friend."

I am not alone on this beach. Perhaps a *galjoen* fisherman lifts his nylon to let me pass and remarks: "Caught one with the first cast — but now the tide is going out." The time for galjoen is when the surf is crashing on the beach, for then they come inshore boldly to feed on red-bait torn from the rocks. It is a magnificent, full-blooded fish, strong and solid as the old-time galleon after which it is named. When the hanepoot grapes are ripe the galjoen are caught on rods and hand lines all along the beach, and a man may fill a sack with them during a night's fishing. Some city folk dislike the galjoen, saying that it is all veins. They do not know how to cook it. The rich galjoen is the farmer's favourite. His wife cuts it down the backbone like a snoek, separating the halves, salts and dries it in the wind and grills it. At a seaside picnic the galjoen is placed unskinned in hot embers on a hot flat rock. The charred skin is easily removed, and then you have a delicacy indeed. Some detect a seaweed flavour about galjoen, but this is never unpleasant.

When the tide is out I often pass a digger of white mussels, working fast and with concentration; for the sensitive mussel knows when he is being hunted and goes down into the sand for safety. Nearly

always there is driftwood on the beach, and on rare occasions fine planks of oak and teak, or old timber from ships buried under the sand. Have you ever seen ship's timber in a fire? People living along this beach of mine are still using timber from wrecks and condemned hulks of long ago. Such wood makes a flaming blue furnace, a rare fire indeed, and a sight to bring phantoms to life.

Hundreds of ships have been lost in these waters, thousands when you think of the centuries that have passed since the first Portuguese navigators sailed into these seas. They found an old Portuguese sword in the dunes once, after a south-east gale had blown for days and driven the sand before it. Just a brass hilt with an inch of blade, glittering under the sun again after four centuries. I suppose the owner was killed in a fight with the Hottentots. But the relics of old wrecks are more common than the fragments of battle. Sometimes the captains were blinded by fog or overwhelmed by great seas. Often enough they dragged their anchors in open roadsteads. Some caught fire and the powder magazines blew up. Many were swallowed by quicksands. Other wrecks lay rotting on the seafloor until the holds broke open. Iron ships keep their

cargoes for a long time. Then slowly over the years the stuff comes out. Gale after winter gale stirs up the sand below the surface until the day arrives when tide and current join forces to cast on shore something that catches the beachcomber's eye. Then at last he has his gift from Neptune.

Think of all the dead ships lying on the ocean bed. Treasure ships and slavers, troop ships and pirates, with all the riches of the Indies, all the silks and jewels, gold and ivory, silver and china and spices. Tons of lovely Chinese eggshell china rests below these waves; fragile little cups of the Chien Lung period, Nankin vases, hand-painted porcelain and plates with the Dutch East India Company's monogram. Of course you do not often find an unbroken piece, but I did meet a man who had picked up an old leaden platter, a candle snuffer, old-fashioned bottles shining with iridescent colours, and a silver shoe-buckle.

One winter the whole keel of a ship was thrown up on the beach. All her keel timbers and most of her ribs. She must have been lying submerged in shallow water for a couple of centuries. I could guess her age because her timbers were fastened with wooden pins. The turmoil of the gale



People living along this beach of mine are still using timber from wrecks and condemned hulks of long ago.

had scoured out the sand, and the tide lifted the old shin and put her on the beach high and dry and bottom up. After a gale like that you might find some money. On the other hand you might just come across beads or a rusty snuffbox, or a set of false teeth. Beachcombers never know what to expect, and seldom do they speak of their finds.

Every seaside village along the South African coast has its wreck legends. Often there is a cluster of rocks along the beach called Oude Skip; and I know places where you can still see traces of those old ships. Yes, I shall walk on many a lonely beach and talk of many a treasure. But the only wealth I am seeking on these sands is of a sort that all may share. You can take your troubles up the beach, troubles and bitterness and worry, and lose them in the sand. The beachcomber finds peace.

I doubt whether any one beachcomber has ever seen the whole South African coastline from the land, every mile of eighteen hundred miles stretching from the Orange River mouth to where the Union ends one mile north of the Kosi River mouth. Seamen and airmen must have glimpsed the full length, but a man who had walked the full distance would be a beachcomber indeed.

First there is the long, guarded Namaqualand coast where I saw diamonds only in the manager's office at Alexander Bay. This is a coast of fog, a coast where the rollers heave in from the westward, a coast with anchorages of the sort that make a seaman shudder. Only when you pass south of the diamond zone at Lambert's Bay and reach the fishing settlements will you discover shelter from the anger of the sea. I am especially fond of calm Saldanha Bay with its peaceful lagoon, and I shall return to that sanctuary, and to other places of pleasant memories, later in this journey.

Who owns the beaches? As a rule, the Governor-General is the legal owner, and the sea-shore is defined as the land between high-water mark and low-water mark. High-water mark is often hard to define, although the law says it is the highest point reached by winter gales. When the surveyor asks old residents to help him, a great deal of conflicting evidence is offered. And, of course, the beaches change according to the whims of the sea. One surveyor found that a beacon he had set up on the supposed high-water mark was in the sea beyond the breakers.

Only in the Cape are there a few privately-owned

beaches. One of them is that charming strip called Oudekraal beyond Camp's Bay, property of the Van Breda family for generations. Another private beach is to be found in the Bakoven area. Near the bathing-boxes at Muizenberg a section of sand is owned by the Aurets, the fishing family, who were granted this private beach by Lord Charles Somerset.

Along the Cape coast, round the southern tip of Africa, are the beaches I know best. There is a lonely stretch where a farmer told me a story of flotsam in his grandfather's time. Two large hogsheads washed ashore, and the farmers and fishermen gathered round these gifts from the sea. It was rum, fine Jamaica rum. The eager men hurried off to their homes, returning with every bottle and keg they could lay hands upon. When the hogsheads were empty they were broken up for firewood on the principle that "dead men tell no tales". Rum is an uncommon drink in those parts. One absent-minded farmer entertained a visiting magistrate soon after the incident and gave him a tot of rum. The magistrate guessed what had happened, but he was a sportsman. "That's the finest *brandy* I've tasted for a long time, Oom

Willem," he remarked. "You might let me have a bottle to take away with me."

Some years later the currents swept a number of boxes and barrels on to the same beach. Bright memories of the rum were revived, but this flotsam turned out to be paint brushes, pigments, turpentine, linseed oil and other oddments. Moreover, the Customs officers heard about it, and a man who had picked up one paint brush, one box of matches and a tin of curry powder had to pay a fine of two pounds.

Names on the chart of this coast explain the flotsam, and the bones of lost ships buried in the sand. Danger Point and Birkenhead Rock tell their own stories. Round the hummocks of Cape Agulhas, with its red and white lighthouse, the wrecks cluster thickly. Not many ordinary travellers know the long, sandy coast that leads eastwards from there. In some of the farmhouses are relics of wrecks. Near the Breede River mouth there is a homestead where the visitor is shown teak chairs black with age, and old-fashioned ship's buckets of oak with brass hoops. It was a long time ago, but they tell you that the only survivors of that wreck were two Frenchmen, who were found delirious in

the dunes, half dead from thirst. Sometimes you find a ship's bell with a name and date, and then it is possible to fill in the gaps. Often a tragedy of the sea is veiled by the mists of time.

Almost every South African motorist is at home on the coast road that runs from Mossel Bay past lakes and vleis to Knysna, and on again, touching small ports and old anchorages to Algoa Bay. Wherever you walk on the beaches and the banks of navigable rivers, there are the dramas of the sea and the wonders of the deep. Beyond the Buffalo River lies the Wild Coast, with the frangipane and kaffir-bread trees growing down to the beaches. And there is Coffee Bay, where the beachcombers, of long ago drank a cargo of coffee washed up by the sea.

When you reach Port St. Johns you are in the home of strange legends. This is the coast where guns from Portuguese galleons and the gold pieces called star pagodas have been recovered; here beneath the waves is treasure as rich as any the Grosvenor carried. On the last stretch of all this coastline, where the Indian Ocean breaks over the shoals off Zululand, you will find Cape Vidal marked on the chart. Captain Alexander Vidal, R.N., deserved that honour. One of the greatest of naval surveyors, he

charted long sections of the South African coast at a period when the work was even more tedious, and far more dangerous than it is today.

Duarte Pacheco, the Portuguese pilot, was the first medieval seaman to place the shores of Southern Africa on a useful chart. (It is probable that the Phoenicians were there long before him, but they kept their discoveries secret and left no records.) Pacheco carried out his running surveys early in the sixteenth century; and in describing the dangers he made this wise remark: "The best thing a man can do is to be on the look-out." Some of the places named by those early Portuguese remain on the modern charts; many have vanished, while others have been translated.

Cape Voltas, just to the south of the Orange River, was the point where Diaz met strong head-winds and had to tack out to sea. Voltas means "tacks". I stood on that high promontory some years ago, conscious of the privilege, for it lies nowadays within the closely-guarded diamond area. St. Helena Bay is another Portuguese name. The historians are not sure whether Diaz or Vasco da Gama discovered it, but it is clear that Da Gama spent eight days there cleaning his ships, mending

sails and taking in firewood. I think he discovered and named the place.

Saldanha Bay was a Portuguese discovery, though here again the pilot who first entered the fine harbour cannot be identified. Old charts show the headland to the north of the bay as Ponta da San Lucia, and I think this might well be restored. For some unknown reason the Portuguese left the wonderful enclosed sheet of water, a haven of refuge with no history of shipwrecks, without a name. Table Bay was then known as Saldanha Bay. It was not until Van Spilbergen's voyage in 1601 that Table Bay received its present name, while the nameless bay became Saldanha. In the Portuguese days, Table Mountain appears to have been charted as Monte Negro, while the neighbouring country was Terra Fragosa, the rocky land.

Agulhas first appeared on Cantino's chart dated 1502, but the reason for the Portuguese name is not absolutely clear. Agulhas means a needle, and many people have concluded that it was chosen because the cape juts sharply into the sea. A later theory is that the magnetic compass needle pointed due north at the time of the discovery. Pacheco charted the cape as Point St. Brandon, after an Irish saint,

regarded by Diaz as the patron saint of voyagers.

Cabo do Infante (after Joao Infante, master of a ship in the Diaz fleet), Bahia dos Vaccas (bay of cows) and Bahia dos Vaqueiros (bay of cowherds, now Mossel Bay) are other Portuguese names along the southern coast. Mossel Bay was also known to the Portuguese as Aguada de San Bras, watering place of San Bras, whose day it was when Diaz called. Cape St. Blaize, which shelters Mossel Bay, has remained on the chart, a corruption of San Bras.

I was taught at school that Algoa Bay was so called because the Portuguese put in there on the way to Goa, while Delagoa Bay was their port of call on the return voyage. This, I now find, was nonsense. Pacheco describes a marsh which the navigators found there and named Alagoa (lagoon). Among the vivid, descriptive names of the Portuguese one can hardly forget Terra dos Fumos, the present Zululand coast, where Diaz found the native chiefs to be *fumos* (friendly). Later map-makers confused *fumos* with fire, and now a headland appears on the chart as Smoky Cape!

Seamen of the Dutch East India Company did their share of the coastal survey, and the soundings prove

that they tackled the work conscientiously. Charts made in Holland three centuries ago show the sheltered bays where these old navigators careened their ships. Many a bay was named after a Dutch ship that anchored there, or left her bones on the rocks. (Simon's Bay, for example, was first called Yselstein Bay because the Dutch ship *Yselstein* used it in the very early days.) Along the coast, however, it is often hard to say whether some of the Dutch place names were bestowed by landsmen or seamen. I know a former naval surveyor who cleared up one mystery while at work near Plettenberg Bay. Some of the Afrikaans-speaking people there puzzled him by their references to "Van der Moses Berg", a mountain which he could not find on any map or chart. At last he asked a farmer to point out the mountain. He then found that it was the Pico Formosa of the Portuguese, corrupted first to Formosa Berg and finally to "Van der Moses Berg".

Gunner's Quoin, or Quoin Point, was an English name that appeared on the Cape charts years before the first British occupation. This hummocky cape, scene of many wrecks, was first marked as Buffel-jagberg, a name which survives on land maps.

Some unknown British seaman must have seen in it a resemblance to the wedge of metal or wood used to give the correct elevation to an old muzzle-loading cannon. Captain Cook mentioned it in the story of his Pacific voyage.

French naval officers surveyed Table Bay and other sections of coast during the "French occupation" towards the end of the eighteenth century. Chavonnes Battery, on the shore of Table Bay, was named by them; but they do not appear to have selected French names for the rocks and shoals they discovered.

Early last century came square-rigged British men-o'-war to start a planned hydrographic survey. It was laborious work in the days when soundings were taken by a sailor heaving a lead-line; and the late, method of dropping a weight attached to piano wire in deep water and reeling it in by machine also called for much patience. However, those old British ships, using sail alone, produced fine charts. Older chart-makers had embellished their work with galleons and mermaids, dolphins and whales. These men filled in the gaps. "By the mark five!" The lead has struck bottom, white bunting on the surface. "By the deep six!" Each day had its incidents.

Landing parties used to find all sorts of queer adventure on the South African coast last century. Lieutenant Archdeacon, whose name still appears on the charts, was attacked and captured with his men in Pondoland by hostile natives. Many were the encounters with crocodiles, wild animals and savages. Captain W. F. W. Owen was one of the pioneers, and two famous ships, *Leven* and *Barracouta*, sailed under his orders. Owen did not lend his name to any place on the South African coast. (Owen Bay near Port Nolloth should be John Owen Bay, named after someone I have been unable to trace.) Port Nolloth, of course, recalls Commander M. S. Nolloth of H.M.S. *Frolic*, an officer who surveyed the Cape west coast in the middle of last century.

Captain Owen had called at Rio on his way to the Cape, and while there he bought a hulk which he named Cockburn for use as a store ship. This was a ship with a story. She had been a steamer, one of the first in the world. Her engine had been removed, and she arrived at Simonstown in 1822 rigged as a schooner. She was driven ashore there in a gale the following year, and sold for old timber. What a museum piece she would have made!

Owen lost a number of his men from malaria while he was surveying the tropical coasts. One of his officers described the situation in these words: "A service at all times accompanied by danger was here rendered tenfold hazardous by an unseen but too certain foe. A British seaman fears no enemy that his eye can see, but the pestilential breath of Africa is a source of silent terror." Emu rock, in the Knysna harbour entrance, recalls another danger of the early days. A survey ship named H.M.S. *Emu* was lost on that death-trap.

Durnford of Point Durnford and Port Durnford in Zululand was a British midshipman. Pringle of Pringle Bay, near Cape Hangklip, was a British admiral. I cannot find the names of my old friends of the old pre-World War II South African Naval Service on the charts, except where credit is given for the years of work performed. Lieut.-Commander (later Commodore) James Dalgleish was in command of the first survey ship *Protea*, and I went to sea as his guest. On the little ship's last day under the naval flag I drank a reminiscent pink gin or two in her wardroom. I knew what she had done.

She had taken chains of soundings with the echo machine, like a plough in a field, making furrow

after furrow, all parallel and arrow-straight, each one-eighth of a mile from the one before. I remembered the resounding knock of the echo gear, ringing down twice a second, filling the stokehold with the noises of a smithy and making the stokers curse. I thought of the pinnacle rocks detected by the *Protea's* boats working in pairs, sweeping the sea with wire cables between them. (Protea Rock to the south of Dassen was one that all the earlier surveyors had missed.) I remembered the samples hauled up from the sea floor, mud and coral, pebbles and shell, gravel and sand, all to be marked on the charts. Day after day from dawn to sunset, year after year, the work had gone on ... line after line of soundings, shore marks and beacons, sextant angles, depths; tracing paper covered with figures; wrecks with the kelp growing out of them located and marked; plans of villages indicated; little-known coves and lovely beaches drawn for the mariner.

I remembered the day when *Protea* had appeared off Blaauwberg village and some of the old people declared that she was seeking the legendary sunken treasure off Bokkem Bay. And now the day had come when nearly all the *Protea's* company had to

find jobs on shore. I tried to find a moral, and Dalgleish gave it to me in the words of a great British hydrographer : “The accuracy of the work of each assistant, when proved, is an infinite gratification to him, and he has also the continual satisfaction of feeling that a permanent record will remain in the chart which is to guide hundreds of his fellow seamen on their way.”

I have charts of the waters I sailed long ago in small yachts, and sometimes I take out the magnifying glass and go over my old cruising grounds again. There are the dangers the old surveyors found; Vulcan Rock and Albatross Rock and the Bellows; and here is Rondeberg Breaker on the way to Saldanha. I locate that snug anchorage beyond Hoedjies Point; and then Jim Crow Rock and Britannia Blinder on the way to the Berg River. “These charts – I think the fairies have the making of them, for they bewitch sober men,” said Raleigh. Walk the lonely beaches as I do, but be sure that the men who charted the coastline have been there before you. I believe they felt, as deeply as any men, the magic of beachcombing.

Chapter 2

BEACHCOMBERS BEFORE ME

IS THERE another bay in the world where the beachcomber may discover contrasts as sharp as the modern resorts and the wild stretches of False Bay? Here at Muizenberg is a famous beach, crawling with humanity to a degree which some find revolting. And only a few miles away at Hangklip and Cape Point are beaches so isolated that a hermit would seldom have to scowl at intruders.

Hangklip remained unknown to all but a few until the military road built in World War II gave access to an untamed and still almost unspoilt stretch of country. True, there are modern cottages along a coast where once only the *Strandlopers* and the cave-dwelling runaway slaves were at home. Yet the veld and the old mountains stretch away and away with the same patches of colour they showed before man entered this paradise.

Runaway slaves were the *drosters* of Cape legends, and sometimes their adventures were remarkable. I suppose nearly all of them came to a bad end in one way or another. Many a fugitive returned starving and was flogged. Some lived on *veldkos* and

shellfish and stolen cattle, but it was a hard and dangerous life. One large band of *drosters*, however, contrived to enjoy a long spell of security and plenty, apparently a happy life of freedom, in the Hanglip area. They might have idled years away in their retreat but for their own folly.

Oom Stoffel Albertyn of Onrust told me the story of the Hangklip slaves. He knew those beaches as a boy in the 'nineties of last century, when you could get in with an ox-wagon if you watched the tides at the Palmiet River mouth. It was often a treacherous crossing; but if you studied the conditions there was a period at low tide when the sand settled and a span of oxen could haul a wagon through the river without being trapped. Betty's Bay (or Dawidskraal as the Caledon farmers call it) and Pringle Bay were other beaches where the tides had to be watched if the wagon was to come through safely.

If you approached Hangklip from Gordon's Bay there was a path so rough and narrow and steep that, as Oom Stoffel said, even a baboon would be in trouble". A pack horse might travel along this route at some risk, but there were places where the load had to be removed.

Such was the sanctuary of the slaves, an isolated area of at least twenty thousand acres with dunes and beaches, veld and vleis between the mountains and the sea. It was, and still is, a land of leopard, *muishond* and wild cat, *grysbok* and *steenbok*, redwing and greywing partridge, pheasant in the mountains and the wild duck called geelbek on the pans. Near the waterfalls grow the blue disas. Giant proteas, mountain rose, crassula, nerina and heath adorn the landscape. Dense *melkbos* gives shelter. Ferns and everlastings flourish in the kloofs. And at Rooi Els and Pringle Bay are the caves which the drosters used. They had stolen weapons before leaving civilisation, and they had a boat.

They might have lived on game and fish, shellfish and roots like the *Strandlopers* who were there before them. But they longed for cattle and sheep. Those were the days, in the late eighteenth century, when farmers bringing livestock from the Overberg were still using the cruel Elandspad route, near the present Sir Lowry's Pass. The drosters raided outlying farms and sometimes ambushed the farmers bound for Elandspad and Cape Town. They evaded pursuit cleverly, using rivers to cover their tracks, and for a long time no one found their

hiding-place.

One night the *drosters* ambushed a party of farm servants, accompanied by two white children, driving cattle to market. The raiders murdered the servants and seized not only the cattle but the children – a boy of fourteen named Simon and a girl. Then they retreated to the Rooi Els cave, on the False Bay coast between Gordon's Bay and Pringle Bay. It seems that the *drosters* were all illiterate, and wanted someone capable of writing the passes which would enable them to move freely about certain Cape districts where they would not be recognised. The girl was forced to supply these documents. Unknown to the slaves, she also added a note begging for help and said that she and Simon were in a cave on the coast.

No sooner was this document examined than a *veldkornet* named Jan Linde called out a commando to rescue the children. The *drosters* who had been arrested had refused to act as guide. Linde then played a clever trick. He allowed a number of cattle to stray near the head waters of the Steenbras river, and set men to watch them. This was a temptation which the drosters could not resist. They drove the cattle off to the Rooi Els cave. The commando

followed.

It was a difficult situation for the attackers. In the mouth of the cave the slaves had built a barricade of shells and ashes. They lay behind it with their firearms. And they held the two children as hostages.

It would have been possible to starve the *drosters* out, but then the children would have suffered with them. Someone had to storm the entrance, and the man who volunteered to lead a party into the nest of the *drosters* was Barend Simon, a relative of the kidnapped boy. Simon crept up to the entrance, shot the leader of the drosters and rescued the children unhurt.

I wish that I could be sure of every detail of this drama. An official report, written at the time, found its way to the Cape Archives. It was consulted by a student in recent years, and is still there, but it cannot be found. According to one unofficial account which I have, forty-three slaves were wiped out in the fight, and only one old woman who had seen the dawn break over the ocean that day lived to watch the sunset. Oom Stoffel Albertyn declares that the Governor presented Barend Simon with a

freehold farm as a reward for his bravery, and named it Barendseredaad.

In the Hottentots Holland mountains there is a narrow defile called Moordenaars Poort, one of many such place-names on the Cape maps. That is where the *drosters* murdered the farm servants and captured the children.

Oom Stoffel had also explored the Pringle Bay Cave. This he regarded as the last stronghold of the *drosters*, and one which would have been impregnable if the *drosters* had retreated to it. The sea thunders into the entrance. It can be reached only at low tide after climbing down a precipice with a rope.

“Willy van Breda and I went in with candles for about eighty yards,” Oom Stoffel recalled. “It was dark and damp, and the bones of large game animals and cattle still littered the floor after all those years. We also found many trunks of *melkhout* trees, evidently used as fuel when the slaves feasted on the stolen meat. *Strandloper* graves, skeletons and relics are plentiful round about the cave.”

Among the relics were many perforated stones. It is

generally believed that these were used by primitive people to add weight to their digging sticks. Oom Stoffel, however, thinks that the perforated stone formed part of a game trap. Plaited sinews were used as a noose and tied to a tree. The perforated stone would slip down when an animal was trapped and hold it fast.

Dawidskraal, an old landmark in the Hangklip area, was probably named after a Hottentot chief who lived there long ago, his huts shaded by the very trees where modern campers find shelter. Rooi Els may have referred to the red alder tree (*Cunonia capensis*) or the local name of a fish that was plentiful there. Malkopsvlei (the Bass Lake of some maps), near Dawidskraal, means “lake of the mad heads”. Cattle were caught in the mud there and drowned, striving madly to keep their heads above water.

Oldest of all place-names in the area is Hangklip itself, the “overhanging rock” discovered by a party sent overland by Van Riebeeck three years after his arrival. (Hangklip replaced the older Portuguese name of Cabo Falso.) Van Riebeeck’s men were led by Corporal Willem Muller and guided by the troublesome Hottentot interpreter Harry. They

found a young whale stranded on the beach near Hangklip, and the Hottentots of the party feasted on the blubber.

Hangklip seems to have been first given out as a farm in 1841, with J. A. Louw as the owner. It passed some time later to William Walsh, one of the four Walsh brothers of Caledon, owners of the baths. Walsh started a fishery at Holbaai in 1885, laying a fresh water pipe-line from Dasberg and putting up fish packing sheds, and neat thatched limestone cottages. Snoek, harders, *geelbek*, silver fish and hottentot were caught in great quantities by Walsh’s crews of Filipinos and Malays; but the market was unfavourable, the place was too isolated, the fishermen never settled down there and the whole enterprise failed. When the Albertyns, father and son, trekked in there, weeds were growing through the seams of the fine teak boats and the place was in ruins.

Oom Stoffel said there were only two cottages on the Hangklip farm in those days. One was occupied by Walsh’s cattle watcher, as there were many cows on the farm and they had to be protected from the leopards. In the other cottage, some distance away at Pringle Bay, lived two young Scots named

Gardner and Polsnach. They were hunters and beachcombers pure and simple, revelling in this lonely paradise where they could do exactly what they liked without interference. Such expert shots did they become that they picked off redwing partridges on the wing with their rifles. They had a rowing boat which they used to fetch provisions from Gordon's Bay. One day the boat was swept off the beach and lost. Gardner and Polsnach then decided to pack up and clear out. They did it on the spur of the moment, leaving their last meal on the table. You can still see the ruins of their cottage.

So Oom Stoffel Albertyn and his wife were alone, save for the cattle-watcher, during many of their visits to Hangklip. They camped there with the ox-wagon year after year, during February and March, the slack time on their Bot River farm. "I can still hear the mussels cracking under the wagon-wheels as we drove along the beach," Oom Stoffel remarked.

Hangklip provided some of their meals, but they always loaded the wagon with a cask of good wine, coffee, a bag of boeremeel for bread, eight air-tight paraffin tins of boerebeskuit, and plenty of ox-biltong.

Often they camped in the *melkbos* on the south side of the vlei at Betty's Bay. Oom Stoffel shot a *grysbok* on his first visit there and hung it up near the tent-pole. Next morning it had gone, and the leopard spoor told the tale. Many a leopard Oom Stoffel trapped there, and one he shot dead in the open; a quick, lucky shot, for the dogs had infuriated the leopard and it was charging the hunter, as leopards usually do, when he dropped it with a shotgun loaded with slug.

Now and again a sea turtle crawled up on the beach and went into Mrs Albertyn's cooking pot. Oom Stoffel also caught terrapins in the vlei near Stony Point. These water tortoises possess stink glands, but once these have been removed and the head cut off, a delicious stew can be made.

Some of the vleis were full of *springers*, the fresh water mullet about eighteen inches long and very fat. Oom Stoffel did not suspect their presence for a long time, but one evening a sea eagle perched in a *melkbos* tree at the camp and dropped a *springer* by mistake. Acting on this hint, Oom Stoffel set a net at night and secured a number of the finest fish he had ever tasted. "Cook them like harders – brown them in the pan," advises Oom Stoffel.

In a little bay near Hangklip one afternoon Oom Stoffel hauled his trek-net and brought in more than eight hundred harders. He and his wife worked until four the next morning, washing, cleaning and salting that marvellous catch. Walsh's cattle-watcher took those they could not preserve, and dried them for the winter.

Red steenbras was Oom Stoffel's favourite angling fish, as good sport and good food. His largest weighed one hundred and fifteen pounds. This is also the fish which professional fishermen prefer, one of the fish which do not become coarse with age and size. The head makes the most nourishing of all fish soups. Fried fillets are juicy, and this great fish can also be roasted. Oom Stoffel usually had a wide variety of fish. There were days when he reeled in the *geelbek*, steenbras and albacore as fast as he could bait his hook. And in the shallows of Pringle Bay he could spear soles by the dozen.

Wild duck flew up in such numbers that Oom Stoffel once killed nine with one cartridge. But his most unexpected victim was a sixteen-foot sea elephant which he found basking in the sun. He fired this shot early in World War I, when the Hangklip whaling station had been opened. Native

labourers extracted the liver and teeth for medicine. "Baas, if I had this thing in my country, I would be a rich man," a labourer told Oom Stoffel.

The beachcombers of Hangklip had no rivals when the cargoes of wrecked ships washed ashore. Oom Stoffel's first find, during the South African War, consisted of drums of army biscuits and casks of bully beef. Unfortunately this had been spoilt by the sea, and had to be given to the dogs. A Norwegian sailing ship loaded with jarrah railway sleepers went on the rocks at Palmiet River while Oom Stoffel was there, and several of the crew were drowned. But the wreck that fascinated Oom Stoffel was an old, nameless ship with a legend of treasure. It was said that the ship had been lost on the Hangklip coast as a result of a mutiny, and that the survivors had buried the ship's money when they reached the shore. Parts of the masts and the anchor-chain mark the spot, but Oom Stoffel never found the money.

"Those were good old days," declared Oom Stoffel. "Later on the place was opened up and there were all sorts of restrictions. We really knew freedom. We took the cream off the milk."

Oom Stoffel's strangest tale had its beginning and end in the Hangklip wilderness. One of the friends of his youth was Jimmy Walsh of Caledon, a son of one of the four Walsh brothers who have been mentioned earlier. Stoffel and Jimmy had often gone fishing and duck shooting together. It came as a deep shock to Stoffel when he heard that Jimmy Walsh and his brother Tom had been sent to Robben Island as lepers.

For many years leprosy had been more prevalent in the Caledon district than elsewhere in the Cape. A leper hospital was opened at Hemel en Aarde early last century; and in 1846 this colony was removed to Robben Island. Exile on the island became compulsory towards the end of last century. It was thought that the diet of salt fish, popular round about Caledon, might cause the disease. The theory has since been disproved; but it is possible that doctors were rather too ready to diagnose leprosy when patients suffering from skin conditions came to them from the Caledon district. Tom and Jimmy Walsh were sent to Robben Island about fifty years ago. *Jimmy Walsh was not a leper.* His brother died on the island, but at no time in his life did Jimmy suffer from the disease.

Jimmy must have suspected that a tragic blunder had been made. Leprosy is not infectious and it is only mildly contagious; so that even as a patient in a leper hospital he was able to escape the scourge. Even more remarkable was his escape from the island. He was a clever carpenter. In one of the hospital rooms he made all the parts of a boat without anyone discovering that it was a boat he was building. Then he removed it to a quiet place among the rocks, screwed it together and rowed to Blaauwberg beach. The authorities found the boat there later, with the name Homeward Bound painted on the stern.

"I was longing to see my mother," Jimmy told Stoffel long afterwards. "And I did see her. She was in Kimberley, and I spent three days with her before they caught me and took me back to the island."

Jimmy Walsh spent thirteen years on Robben Island. Then an intelligent doctor ruled that he was not a leper, and he was allowed to go. After long correspondence he received a sum of money from the government. One can hardly talk of compensation when a man has lost thirteen years of his life on a leper island. Jimmy Walsh returned to the Caledon district, and fished with his friend Stoffel

at Hangklip again.

“I last saw Jimmy Walsh in 1951, looking after his mother who was ninety-one years old,” Oom Stoffel told me. “As I walked up to their cottage through the little garden my wife admired a teak bench. Jimmy had made it from shipwreck timber while he was on Robben Island. After we had left, I found that Jimmy had hidden the bench in the back of my car.

“His mother died soon after our visit. A few days later Jimmy died as a result of a motor-cycle accident. I was thinking of Jimmy, his years of sadness and his happiness when he returned to his mother; and one day not long after Jimmy’s death I went to a cave at Hangklip which Jimmy and I had often explored together.

“There on a ledge in the cave was a piece of paper with verses in Jimmy’s handwriting. It was something he had written as a sort of thanksgiving after his release from Robben Island. I can’t remember the words now, except one line: God made home for those who roam.”

Between the Rooi Els River and Gordon’s Bay runs a sinister coast fourteen miles long. So many

anglers have been washed off the rocks and battered to death or drowned that this stretch is now regarded as the most dangerous in South Africa.

Strong winds roar down unexpectedly from the mountains. The angler, who has been lulled into a sense of false security by hours of calm weather, is carried away by a swell that sweeps his rock without warning. Death often comes at the turn of the tide.

Gordon’s Bay, originally Visch Hoek, was a fishing harbour in Willem Adrian van der Stel’s time. Six white men and a number of slaves were stationed there to provide fish for the Governor’s farm labourers. Visch Hoek it remained until early last century, when it became Gordon’s Bay in honour of Colonel Gordon, commandant of the Dutch troops. The name was, in fact, transferred from Pringle Bay, which Gordon himself had named Gordon’s Bay during a journey round the coast.

False Bay has known few shipwrecks in comparison with Table Bay, but I find that the sloop Benjamin was lost with all hands at Gordon’s Bay in the first year of last century. Gordon’s Bay was a whaling station at that period, with huge iron pots

for boiling down the blubber. A sale of fifty-four morgen of land was held there in 1846, and the advertisement stated: "It is of great value, the only bay from which produce can be shipped in all weathers. Buildings include an excellent house with good-sized rooms."

On the Steenbras mountain above Gordon's Bay stand a giant anchor and the letters G.B., in white stones. These emblems were the work of an instructor and cadets of the South African nautical college General Botha. The college was transferred to Gordon's Bay from Simonstown after the training ship General Botha had been scrapped. On that mountainside many years ago a Norwegian named Emil Erikson (at one time host at the Sir Lowry's Pass Inn) prospected for gold and mined a small quantity.

Gordon's Bay has known perilous hours. Often it has been menaced by bush fires. Once the sea crashed over all its previous high water marks, burst into shops and houses, and swept round a bedroom where a mother lay with her new-born babe.

Holloway's Inn was the first hotel, on the Gordonia Hotel site. A guide published a century ago calls

Gordon's Bay "a rising village, favourite resort for invalids". Fish cost sixpence for ten or fifteen pounds.

The Strand, to the north of Gordon's Bay, has never been happy about its name. It was discovered by the same Corporal Muller who went on to Hangklip. First resident was Dawid du Buisson, a Huguenot teacher, who secured a grant of land there early in the eighteenth century. At that time the name Mostert's Bay had already appeared on the map. (There was also a Heksebaai not far away, but I have not been able to trace a legend of a witch.) The place was known as Van Ryneveldsdorp in the middle of last century, after the landdrost who hired out land to farmers who wished to put up strandhuisies. Then came the name Hottentots-Holland Strand, followed by Somerset West Strand. Letters often went astray, some to Somerset West, others to Somerset East; so the name was changed to Somerset Strand shortly before World War I, and The Strand shortly after that war. I doubt whether finality has been reached.

Mostert's Bay was a Malay fishing village, peopled by followers of the great Sheik Joseph, holiest of all the holy men who were exiled at the Cape late in

the seventeenth century, and whose *kramat* stands at Faure. Many of The Strand's two thousand Malays claim descent from Sheik Joseph's retinue. These early fishermen made the first tracks from the bay to the farms, selling their fish or exchanging it for grapes and other farm produce.

If you consult the Cape of Good Hope Almanac for 1843 you will find this entry: "Several houses and huts have of late been erected at Mostert's Bay, which is occasionally visited by strangers and others for the purpose of using the sea-bath. There are six fishing boats manned by persons of colour." The fishermen landed a *kabeljou* six feet three inches long about ninety years ago, and this was possibly the largest ever caught in Cape waters.

It is clear that the seaside resort was flourishing a century ago in spite of its isolation and the long horse-and-cart journey through the dunes. The first boarding-house was called Die Platdak, burnt down in 1904. Nico Loubser, who built the Marine Hotel on the site, appears to have been an unusual type of publican. He kept a special room next to his, bar for customers who drank too much, and locked them up there for the night to teach them a lesson.

"Somerset West Strand is as popular as ever and prices quite as high this season," reported the *Cape Argus* in September, 1885. "It is chock full of visitors as usual from the uttermost parts of the colony and beyond."

How I wish we could return to those "high prices". A man who stayed at Mrs Le Roux's boarding-house at that period told me that he paid three pounds for a fortnight's stay. Mrs le Roux kept a splendid table. Fish was always fresh. Carafes of wine were supplied free at lunch and dinner. Such meals were greatly appreciated by people from the Karoo who had been eating mutton three times a day.

The dinner that a few old Strand residents may still remember was served on that famous occasion in 1906 when the railway reached the village. Sir Walter Hely Hutchinson, the Governor, was present. They started with hors d'oeuvres, mock turtle soup and fillet of sole à la Strand. Then they went on to pigeon pie, galantine of veal, chicken mayonnaise, roast beef, roast turkey and ham, aspic de foie gras, salad, Van der Stel pudding, Breton cake, macedoine of fruit, dessert, cheese, fruit and black coffee. Not even a royal visitor is faced with

such variety today.

The Strand beach saw the first organised tournaments of jukskei, the national boeresport. This beach is still the holiday stronghold of the Afrikaner, and at the peak of the season the visitors outnumber the residents. It seems a long time since the municipality was too poor to afford a bridge over the Lourens River on the outskirts of the town. Many a traveller fell off the single plank into the river on dark nights (especially at the end of the month) and it is said that some were drowned.

Muizenberg has become a place of such grandeur that I seldom go there nowadays. I preferred the Muizenberg with the wooden bridge over the railway lines and the spacious beach where the fishermen hauled their nets in comfort. It does not look the same from the monstrous pavilion.

I was at Muizenberg as a very small boy, early this century, when surfing was seen there for the first time. A Mr. C. J. Lawrence, who had been in the Pacific islands, was among the pioneers. Then an enterprising boat-builder named Porter put the long, old-fashioned pine surfboards on the market.

Sand yachting came a little later. It was introduced

by the Prillewitz brothers, who designed and built a four-wheeled craft with an ash frame, mainsail and jib. They steered it with a tiller. For a year the brothers careered along the hard sands between Muizenberg and Strandfontein. With a north-wester or southeaster on the beam (what yachtsmen term a “soldier’s wind”) they could race along the beach for six miles and return. The top speed was fifty miles an hour.

Almost half a century after that enterprise I met Mr. E. J. Prillewitz, and he recalled an early adventure. “First time out I capsized the yacht through carrying too much sail,” he said. “Something sharp caught me, and ripped off my pants. After that all went well until the rubber tyres perished. We replaced them with tarred rope.”

The only buildings on Muizenberg beach in those days were Auret’s fishing shed and Farmer Peck’s bathing boxes. The beach was wider than it is now.

Mr. H. Charteris Hooper, the first man to swim from Robben Island to the mainland, carried out some great swimming feats in False Bay in the early years of the century. Once he swam from Muizenberg to Fish Hoek in five hours, making a

wide sweep to avoid the Kalk Bay reefs. On another occasion he swam from Muizenberg to Simonstown, accompanied by the Aurret's fishing boat, in five and a half hours. It was winter. The sea came up and almost overwhelmed the boat. Hooper finished his swim with blistered face and swollen eyes.

Kalk Bay was the favourite False Bay resort last century, and dominated the scene long after the railway had reached Muizenberg. I believe the oldest house at Kalk Bay is "The Hermitage", noteworthy because of a room with three ordinary walls and a boulder for the fourth.

Fresh water was a problem at Kalk Bay in the 'eighties of last century. Each resident who had neither a spring nor a well on his property used to pay a carrier fifteen shillings a month to bring him two buckets of water a day from the spring at Trap-pies, opposite the present Clovelly station.

You can still find old fishermen at Kalk Bay who remember the poverty-stricken days when they lived in floorless shacks and burnt fish oil in cups with wicks when they needed light. They sailed out every weekday in their open boats, returning at

noon to sell the catch. Carts and horses waited in a grove of trees to carry the haul to Wynberg. On Sundays they rested and played. Malays and their wives sauntered along the only street with bright fezzes and brighter dresses. Filipinos played their ball game, kicking the round wicker baskets which their ancestors had brought from the East with them.

Simonstown is a vast naval museum, and when I say that I am not referring only to the old guns captured from Portuguese slavers, the tablets in the churches, the forts and powder magazines, anchors and ancient timber. I am thinking of a true incident related to me by Mrs D. E. Dewar, and of all the dramatic finds which have gone unrecorded.

Mrs Dewar was in Simonstown when Vice-Admiral Sir H. Rawson and his fleet returned from Benin. This was a West African punitive expedition which followed much human sacrifice by a native potentate. Benin was filled with negro works of art, some of great beauty. Officers and men brought souvenirs (or loot) back to Simonstown, and one naval friend presented Mrs Dewar's father with an ornament. It seemed to be of brass, with a chief seated on a throne and three small bells.

Soon afterwards Lady Rawson opened a school bazaar in Simonstown. A “museum stall”, with various articles marked “not for sale”, was among the exhibits; and the ornament with the bells was displayed on this stall. Lady Rawson admired the item and asked whether she could buy it. Mrs Dewar’s father asked her to accept it as a gift. Lady Rawson was delighted. A few days later, however, she returned the gift with a note. She had sent the gift to a jeweller to be cleaned, and it had proved to be solid gold. Nevertheless, Mrs Dewar’s father persuaded her to keep this strange ornament from the West African bush.

I think that Simonstown still hides many secrets. The ships that have gone out from there for a century and a half, dropping anchor in hundreds of queer places, have brought back more odd cargoes than the men at the dockyard gates have discovered.

Once you leave Simonstown for Cape Point, the False Bay scene becomes more primitive. You pass Oatlands, where the Hugos farmed; and Miller’s Point, once owned by the shipping magnate Sir Donald Currie; and Smitswinkel Bay, where there was a blacksmiths’ shop when Pieter Hugo had the farm.

Smitswinkel Bay is protected from tourism by a steep approach. Everything needed by the few bungalow dwellers must be carried down the mountainside. If you could visualise all the beings who have inhabited the cave near sea-level there, you might solve the riddle of mankind. Fishermen sleep there. Mr. E. L. Grigg of Fish Hoek, who has made so many charming pen-and-ink sketches of these parts, found a white family living in the cave not so long ago. The husband, having lost his job and his home, took his wife and two children to the cave. They remained there for months, until the husband found work again. Every day the husband climbed up to a dairy for milk. Once he was ill and his wife went instead. She was halted by a pack of baboons, and had to return empty-handed.

Away from the roads you are in the land where the old *Strandlopers* roamed when they hungered for something more nourishing than shellfish. Red meat, green herbs. Sirkels Vlei, with its terrapins and tortoises, is part of this unchanged country. Not



I think that Simonstown still hides many secrets. The ships that have gone out from there for a century and a half brought back more odd cargoes than the men at the dockyard gates have discovered.

far away is Olifantsbos on the Atlantic shore. This coast has its wrecks, and the sands of Olifantsbos hold several of them.

One large wooden fragment that can still be traced on that beach is probably the hull of the French brig *Rozette*. The ship was found on the beach in August 1786 without a living soul or a corpse on board. This might have become another *Mary Celeste* mystery, but there were detectives in those days and they rounded up six French sailors in the Cape Town taverns. These men confessed (under pressure, no doubt) that they had murdered their captain and officers and other members of the crew, run the ship ashore and stolen the ship's money. All six men were hanged in Cape Town.

Not far from the *Rozette* lie the bones of the *Kafir*, a coasting steamer which ran aground and broke in half eighty years ago. A number of Zanzibar natives were on board. One who was saved had crossed Africa with H. M. Stanley and had been present at the meeting with Livingstone.

At Brightwaters, a little to the south of Olifantsbos, stands the loneliest house in the Cape Peninsula. (I have Mr. Grigg's sketch of it in front of me.) Years

ago this was the Malherbe's cattle run. The Hare brothers, Will and Percy, lovers of wild life, fenced it, stocked it with game birds and buck, and turned the place into a sanctuary. They kept the buildings at Brightwaters and five morgen of land.

Brightwaters has been threatened by fire, baboons and wild ostriches. Once the buildings just escaped destruction by a gigantic wave. But where else in the Cape Peninsula can a beachcomber declare that his nearest neighbour is three miles away?

Chapter 3

BEACHCOMBER'S BAY

SELDOM DO I make the mild effort needed to climb Constable Hill, though I am prepared to walk for miles on hard beaches. Constable Hill, however, gives you one of the most inspiring views on the whole South African coast, a panorama which is not yet known to everyone.

Do you know Constable Hill? It was on the map as "Den Constabel" more than two centuries ago, and on board Dutch men-o'-war the name referred to the gunner, not a policeman. So I suppose this hill overlooking Saldanha Bay gained its name because it would certainly appeal to anyone seeking a commanding position for old-fashioned cannon.

Saldanha Bay is another beachcomber's domain, past and present. To the north are the deep waters. For eight miles the shallows run southwards, forming an enchanting lagoon that is a mile, at most two miles wide. Across the lagoon entrance are the isles of the gulls, where a beachcomber with a boat might gather the pale green eggs for his larder. Down the western channel that runs past Constable Hill sailed the old Dutch ships to fill their water-

casks at the springs. Ships were careened here, too, and it was an English mariner named Silas James whose description of it I found in the narrative of a voyage he made at the end of the eighteenth century.

James said that his ship was "hove down" with purchases on the masts until she was on her beam ends. The boys scraped the barnacles off the bottom while the carpenters stripped off the copper sheathing, caulked the bends, paid the hull with pitch and tar, and then replaced the sheathing. They righted the ship and repeated the process on the other side.

According to James they all underwent "unparalleled hardship and fatigue". Yet he found time to admire the beauties of the islands and the lattoon in September and October that year. They hunted rabbits among the camomile flowers of one of the islands. James thought the lagoon, with its deep channels, was a river, and he wrote these impressions: "The river wherein we were dropping smoothly along, here widening, there contracting, had banks that screened the ship from the surly blasts. These scenes, so peculiar to this part of the coast of Africa, formed a prospect so enchanting

that I am at a loss properly to describe it. All I can say is that it was a modern Eden.”

Almost opposite Constable Hill on the eastern shore of the lagoon is the place which my map calls Oostenwal. It should be Oostwald, after the Hendrick Oostwald Eksteen who had a fishery there early in the eighteenth century. Eksteen must have been wealthy, for he owned a number of cattle farms in the Saldanha area, and he put up such a good homestead at his fishery that the old governors were glad to stay there. I believe they came specially to shoot little wading birds which were regarded as a delicacy. They would not have had to travel as far as the lagoon for buck and game birds. Oostenwal was becoming a ruin when I last visited it. In the yard I saw the blocks fitted with rings where troublesome slaves were punished.

At the southern end of the lagoon is the farm *Geelbek*, named after the duck, not the fish. It has a fine, century-old homestead; but the farm is much older. One of the flat-faced boundary stones of the Cape district was placed there by Governor van der Graaff in 1785, and this is still in position. The horses still reach the lagoon islands at low tide and graze as they did when the Van Bredas started

farming there long ago. No longer do the rhinos blunder through the bush, but fierce pigs that have run wild live in the *palmiet* and menace intruders.

This bay has drawn men of many races to its warm sands. Some were sailors who had become tired of the sea; some worked and others loafed; and most of them, I imagine, found what they were seeking.

H. T. Colebrooke, a wealthy Englishman and authority on oriental matters, invested heavily in land round Saldanha early last century. He saw the harbour as the outlet for a great enterprise which he hoped to build up; and he put a relative in charge of the venture. It came to nothing, but Colebrooke's own notes on life in this part of the country are amusing. He declared that weddings and auctions were the most lively gatherings. People travelled for days to attend a sale. A public dinner was given every night, and wine was served without stint. Cattle, implements, household utensils, negro, Hot-tentot and Malay slaves were all put up for sale. The kind-hearted Colebrooke remarked that it was sad to observe the misery of slaves when parted from their friends.

On the summit of Constable Hill I am reminded of

many experiences round the shores, and many characters who have talked of their adventures. Vondeling Island, close to the Atlantic shore of this long peninsula, reminds me of the men who were marooned there about a quarter of a century ago. Vondeling is a guano island, of course, but the collecting season was over and at the end of April the island was deserted. So Mr. John de Jager, headman of Marcus Island (in Saldanha Bay), and his assistant, Mr. Chris Fourie, decided to sail down to Vondeling to see whether the duikers were breeding and sum up the prospects for the next season.

They were approaching Vondeling in their twelve-foot open boat when a gale blew up from the west. Landing was dangerous, and they were wondering whether the boat would capsize when a huge sea lifted them far up the beach and left them stranded. Heavy seas were breaking from the island to the mainland. They were marooned.

Vondeling Island has good houses nowadays, but at that time there was only a wretched shack with corrugated iron roof. There the two men sheltered from the cold wind and rain, using guano sacks as blankets. The rain was a comfort in one respect, for

it meant they would have water. They had brought only a few sandwiches with them, and knew they would have to depend on the resources of the island for food. De Jager had a box of matches. They were delighted when they found a sack of coal.

For nine days De Jager and Fourie lived like beachcombers on the island, pinned down by the weather. They hunted wild pigeons in the dark with sticks and stones. Penguin eggs were available in large quantities, and these were a godsend. Occasionally they were able to haul up crawfish in an improvised net. So they never went hungry, though they soon became weary of sitting by their fire and eating monotonous meals. At last the wind and the sea went down, and they were able to return to their own island. A coloured labourer, the only man on Marcus Island, had been unable to raise the alarm, and had given them up for lost.

I have always been fascinated by the names on the Saldanha charts and maps, for many are romantic, some are mysterious and most of them suggest stories. Modern charts show a Danger Bay just beyond the north entrance point. That I can understand, for it is open to the west and barred by

sunken rocks. One of my maps gives the alternative name of Tobacco Bay, which is also reasonable enough if a cargo of tobacco once washed ashore there. (That is what happened at Brandewyn Bay not far away.) But a very old map in my collection shows the same inlet as No Tobacco Bay. No one has ever been able to solve that mystery for me.

Doctor's Cave, just beyond Hoedjies Point, baffled me for a long time. The cave is formed by overhanging rocks, well above high water mark. Often I had peered into the entrance while sailing up to the anchorage. Someone told me that a ship with smallpox on board had been quarantined at the anchorage, and that the doctor had gone on shore and died in the cave. It did not make sense to me, and not long ago I came by chance across the true story in a report of a Baptist missionary, the Rev. James McGregor Bertram, written more than a century ago.

Bertram heard that more than two hundred ships were loading guano from Malagas Island in Saldanha Bay, and thousands of seamen and labourers were at work there without a clergyman. So he took passage in the barque Ward Chapman, Entering the bay on a dark night, the ship put about

when she was almost in the breakers, and thus escaped disaster. Boats from the guano fleet towed her to safety.

Next morning the missionary went on shore and found a sort of Donnybrook Fair in progress. "Grog-sellers from the Cape had flocked hither to share in the golden harvest and pitched their tents along the shores of the bay," recorded Bertram. "There was a ready market for their vile wine, which led to scenes of riot and blood-letting."

In the midst of this revelry Bertram met an Irish doctor, "a stout, overgrown and somewhat venerable personage who had converted a cave into an apothecary's shop". The cave served as office, parlour, ante-chamber, dormitory and kitchen, and the doctor "had bottles and vials enough to kill or cure all who might wish to avail themselves of his wonderful pharmaceutic lore".

The doctor charged five pounds a ship, and for this amount he undertook to cure all ills, broken bones or bleeding wounds. Bertram went on: "Nor was he unemployed. The dissipated manner in which the sailors lived; the exposure and overpowering smell of the guano produced inflammation and bleeding

of the eyes and nostrils. All this served to bring into constant service the skill and drugs of the old Irish doctor, and to test his power over such obstinate diseases as dysentery and scurvy.”

Bertram visited the sick with the doctor. He wished to hold a service on Malagas Island, but the captains warned him that the men on the island had mutinied and stopped work. The captains had gone there with firearms and cutlasses to restore order and had been driven off by volleys of guano, dead penguins and gannets.

The determined missionary approached a religious shipmaster and asked for a boat. Pacing the deck with moist eyes, the captain replied: “ I dare not take you to the island. It was barely with my life that I escaped the other day. Preach to those devils? They would only desecrate the service and perhaps take your life.”

Bertram persisted, however, and at last secured a boat with a volunteer crew. Malagas Island was a vast bed of guano which had been accumulating for centuries. In the centre was a flagstaff, with lines stretched in every direction to the water’s edge.

“The lines were designed to mark out, like the

divisions of a plum cake, the portion which each crew could claim,” explained Bertram. “As the boat reared the landing stage, scores of rioters hurried to the jetty. A horrid sight these creatures presented. Clothes lung in tatters. Hideous gashes, blackened eyes and dreadful bruises provided evidence of the maddening fumes of dissipation.”

Bertram singled out the ringleader, “a ferocious fellow, apparently prepared for any deed of desperation”, and shook hands firmly. “Jack!

Do you know me? I am a minister of Christ,” announced Berttam, pulling out the church flag. “It was enough – the right chord was touched,” declared Bertram. “Away they went hurrahing and raised the flag. The signal roused the whole island and they flew from every tent – offscourings of every port on earth.”

Bertram stood on a pile of guano sacks and addressed this strange gathering: “They told me you were the greatest vagabonds under Heaven, that you would take my life. But my brave lads, I tell you that I am never afraid to trust my life in the hands of seamen. Listen to me, and you will have a chance of redeeming your lost character.” Tears streamed down their faces as Bertram preached. Next day

every man returned to duty. Masters of ships in the bay were so grateful that they presented Bertram with a purse of gold.

Thus ended what Bertram described as a “horrid frolic”. The Cape Government levied toll on the guano shipped, at the rate of one pound a ton and collected £200,000. Sixteen months after Bertram’s memorable visit the last of the guano had been scraped off Malagas Island. Only one sailing ship was to be seen in the great bay which, at the height of the rush, had given shelter to three hundred ships. Among the last to leave was the old Irish doctor. “Doctor’s Cave,” and the graves on Malagas Island, are reminders of a wild period in the story of Saldanha.

Paternoster, a village on the sea coast, is a name that appears on very early maps as St. Martin’s Paternoster. I think it is fairly certain that a priest with the Portuguese discoverers said a prayer on landing and named the place. The harbour is sheltered to some extent by two remarkable natural breakwaters of rocks and rocky islets. Many freed slaves settled there. I imagine that Paternoster, with its white thatched cottages and old-fashioned ovens,

has not changed much since the early days. You can still see the stores from which grain was shipped in sailing cutters and schooners before the railway came this way. Some of the fish-curing sheds have been there for a long time. And the people still drink their coffee and eat their wholemeal bread on the stoeps of flat-roofed cottages built long ago.

Paternoster has a cave which has not yet been properly explored. One adventurer crept in among the bats many years ago and emerged with a Bushman skull instead of the smugglers’ treasure he had hoped to find. Some say the cave runs to Hol Baai, where the beach has a hollow sound. Bushmen relics are common enough in this neighbourhood. For variety, you can gather blue glass beads at the place called Kraletjies Bay, scene of a long-forgotten shipwreck. It must have been a large cargo of beads, as they still wash up year after year; the same blue beads.

A wreck on this coast which many remember was the British troopship *Ismore* during the South African War. She carried a Hussar regiment and seven hundred beautiful horses. All the men reached the shore safely at the place known since then as Soldate Baai, but most of the horses were

lost. A fisherman's daughter, born on the night of the wreck, is still living in Paternoster. Her name is Ismore.

Those beaches have been strewn with flotsam enough to drive a beachcomber wild with delight. I met one old man who remembered seagulls feasting on hundreds of hams as they floated towards the shore. Casks of salad oil, tins of flour, tables, chairs and bedding have littered those beaches. Wine vats are used as fishtubs in that district. When the wine came ashore it was buried in the sand and sheep driven over it to baffle the Customs officials. That good Portuguese wine lasted some people for years.

They tell a true story in this district of a wedding shortly before World War I, when all the presents were gifts from the sea. Silver plate, furniture, clocks and rugs, glassware and china had all come from ships which had remained afloat long enough to be looted. And not a penny of duty had been paid on the wine and whisky served at that merry wedding feast.

Langebaan, at the lagoon entrance, had the first hotel on the shores of Saldanha Bay. The founder of the village appears to have been an English sailor

named William Thomas Smith, who built himself a reed hut about a century ago and spent the rest of his life there. Farms along the edge of the bay had been occupied much earlier, of course, but Smith started the village and his descendants are still there.

By 1862, Langebaan was large enough to have its own church, the oldest on the shores of the bay. Now it has become a village of four hundred people. Crash boats of the South African Air Force form a contrast with the fishing cutters and old cottages under thatch.

When I first landed at Langebaan during World War I it was an isolated village with only a wagon-track to the narrow-gauge railway at Langebaan Road. Motor-cars were rare and the post arrived by Cape cart three times a week. You can still see something of the old Langebaan at New Year; the traditional, lively holiday scene with every house and cottage filled and wheat farmers camping along their favourite beach.

I knew a happy old Italian at Langebaan who told me his life story not long before he died. His name was Marra, and he arrived in Table Bay in the

barque *Umberto Primo* as a deck boy at the end of last century. Knifed in a fight with a Spanish sailor, Marra was left behind in hospital when his ship sailed. He came out of hospital and joined a fellow-countryman who was skipper of a little sailing cutter running between Cape Town and Langebaan. They also loaded penguin eggs at the bird islands.

“Those were hard times, and sometimes we collected mussel shells, which were burnt for lime,” Marra recalled. “Shells fetched one shilling and sixpence a bag. We also carried wheat, sheepskins and fish down the coast to Table Bay. The railway ended at Malmesbury, and a great deal of farm produce went by sea. Ox-wagons took four days from Langebaan to Cape Town. The nearest doctor was at Vredenburg, and he came by Cape cart or on horseback and charged five pounds a visit.”

Marra claimed that Langebaan was one of the cheapest villages in South Africa. The figures he gave me were accurate ten years ago, and perhaps they have not altered much. “You can get a comfortable, partly-furnished house at four pounds a month,” Marra told me. “Servants earn thirty to forty shillings a month. Fish is cheap, and every fish that came out of the Ark is to be found in these

waters. Vegetables are grown down the lagoon at Oostenwal. And you can always buy meat.”

Marra might have added that you could also rely on buying a cheap soft mattress, the famous penguin feather mattress of this coast. Penguins moult, and their feathers wash up by the million. Coloured beachcombers collect them. Penguin feathers have to be washed carefully again and again. When all the sand has been removed they are dried in the sun and brushed. A mattress stuffed with these feathers is as warm as any eiderdown, a fit and proper bed for a beachcomber.

Chapter 4

WHALES AND MEN

*We struck the whale, our line paid out,
But a flourish she gave with her tail;
The boat capsized and four men were drowned,
And we never ever caught that whale!*

Brave boys!

And we never ever caught that whale!

Old whaling shanty.

WHALES SWIM within half a mile of my beach during the winter months, though no one pursues them in Table Bay now. I have still to see a whale stranded on Blaauwberg beach. It must have happened in past centuries, for their great bones are covered and uncovered by the dunes; and no doubt it will happen again. But next time there will be no *Strandlopers* to feast on the meat long after the flavour has become too strong for civilised palates.

Sometimes I can tell the species of whales cruising off my beach. Captain Morch Olsen showed me how it was done years ago, when I was out whale-hunting with him off Saldanha. The blue whale sends up a higher fountain of vapour than any other; a tall, wide fifteen-foot “blow”. If the jet is tall and

narrow, it is a swift finner, or *finhval* as the Norwegians say. Humpbacks breathe out in much the same way as finners, but they show more of their bodies and no dorsal fins are seen. The sperm or *kaskelot* throws its spout forward, at an angle which cannot be mistaken.

I thought Olsen’s skill was uncanny when he manoeuvred his ship so that he was never very far away when the whale broke surface after sounding. He noted the whale’s course from the angle of the tail fin when it went down. He guessed the speed. And when the huge creature came up again there was the relentless Olsen waiting his one chance, waiting, following, waiting until he could bring his ship so close that he could swing his harpoon gun round and down before he fired. That is the trick. Seldom indeed is a whale killed by a long shot. You have to get on top of it, twelve or fifteen yards away, and drop your heavy pronged harpoon with its pointed bomb into the whale at pointblank range.

It came as a surprise to me on a recent ocean voyage when a man remarked: “I hope we see a whale – I’ve never seen a whale in my life.” For I have been seeing whales ever since I was a small boy; whales alive and dead. I have eaten them, and

smelt them. Once I was sailing at night in Table Bay when a whale rose so close that it could have finished me and my small yacht with a flick of the tail. Its watery breath fell on my deck and nearly frightened the wits out of me. I thought for a moment that the great black mass alongside was a rock.

I first ate whale meat years ago at the Donkergat station, Saldanha. The Norwegians know how to cook it, and they like it. (One of the sights of the fish markets in Norway which I shall always remember was the display of red, cheap whale meat alongside the tanks of live cod and the pink salmon steaks.) You could feed an army on a fair-sized whale. In fact, one whale cut up into steaks did once provide more than one hundred thousand portions.

The whale I enjoyed at Saldanha was a thin fillet steak from a young blue whale, very fresh, and fried in the pan with onions. No flavour of fish could be noticed; it was just like good, tender beef. Whale meat can also be served in the form of Vienna *schnitzel*, soaked in egg and breadcrumbs and browned in hot butter. Those who dislike whale meat probably fail to secure the right cuts, and cook

it the wrong way.

Norwegians prepare a whale biltong, a salted and smoked meat which is hung until the outside turns black. Cut the crust away and serve the inside cut very thin. This appears on many a *smorgasbord*, and the smoky flavour makes it a delicacy to be remembered. Long black rows of this biltong hung from the roofs of Donkergat in the old days, like hundreds of policemen's batons in the sun. Another way (if ever you have to face a whale diet) is to mince whale and fresh pork and serve as rissoles.

Whale meat is neither fishy nor greasy nor in any way unpalatable if properly treated. I exclude sperm, which is oily. Right whale may be tough, but the tongue is exquisite. The epicures prefer blue whale, humpback, finner and above all the young *sei* whale. Back fillets provide the finest meat. The whale is a clean mammal, and nothing could be cleaner than the deep sea in which it lives. Remember the words of Herman Melville in "Moby Dick": "In the long try-watches of the night it is a common thing for the seamen to dip their ship-biscuit into the huge oil pots and let them fry there awhile. Many a good supper have I thus



Hauling a whale ashore in the old days of Table Bay whaling. Note the wrecked sailing ship on the right.

made.”

South Africa’s greatest free meal of whale meat in recent years was provided near Algoa Bay in 1918, after a fight to the death between two male humpbacks. The body of the loser was washed up on to a sandy beach, and hundreds of Malays gathered there to take the blubber for oil and cut portions of the fresh meat for their tables. Skeleton and baleen of this whale are in the Port Elizabeth Museum.

In the seas that wash South Africa you will find a fair selection of the world’s whales, and one that is found nowhere else, a true South African whale. Dr. L. A. Peringuey, Dr. K. H. Barnard and their most resourceful taxidermist, Mr. James Drury, built up a collection of whales in the South African Museum which is certainly the finest in the southern hemisphere; and this includes a number of rarities. I am a lover of rarities, as I have often said before. Among our whales and dolphins are some so rare that one does not expect to see a specimen once in a century.

I cannot describe the blue whale as a rarity, though with more than fourteen thousand being killed in

the Antarctic every summer it is in grave danger. Blue whales are the largest members of the family. Indeed, there has never been a larger creature on our planet. An elephant would look like a poodle alongside a great blue whale; and even the extinct dinosaur would be dwarfed. The largest blue whale officially measured was a female of ninety feet. This is interesting, because Dr. Peringuey reported just after World War I that he had received “trustworthy evidence” of a blue whale at Saldanha measuring one hundred and two feet four inches. Another blue whale cut up there was longer than the one hundred foot platform at the whaling station. So it is possible that the largest whales ever captured were harpooned in Cape waters.

Blue whales pass through South African waters every year on their way to breeding grounds in warmer seas. But the blue whales have to go hungry during their migration, for the krill (like shrimps) which they live on are far more plentiful in the south. This does not seem to affect their milk, the richest milk on land or sea. Parent whales shot off Saldanha and Durban are lean, but the baby blue whale puts on two hundred pounds in weight a day.

Finners and *sei* belong to the blue whale (rorqual)

family; and so does Bryde's whale, the true South African which I have mentioned. Johann Bryde was Consul for Norway and a pioneer of modern steam whaling in Cape and Natal waters. He noticed that some of the whales called *sei* by the men on the station were of shorter average length, with stiff bristles in their mouths instead of the silky fringe of the *sei* whales' baleen plate. Bryde's whale was less powerful, with a smaller dorsal fin and slender, pointed flippers.

Stomach contents indicated that Bryde's whale preferred small fish to *krill*. Sharks up to two feet in length were found. One stomach revealed fifteen large penguins, but this may have been an accidental mouthful rather than a typical meal. After some argument among zoologists, Bryde's whale was admitted in 1912 as a new species. To identify a large new mammal in the twentieth century is no mean achievement. Little is known of the habits of Bryde's whale, but it appears to be confined to the waters of the Union, South West Africa and Angola. Only one specimen has been observed beyond these limits, and that was reported from Granada in the West Indies.

Right whales gained their name in the days of open

boats and harpoons flung by hand. They were tame, the "right" sort to hunt because they seldom gave any trouble. Some of you may remember a right whale that entered Simon's Bay to calve in September, 1931, and remained there for days. I was taken close to her in a motor-boat, where she stood on her head in the water with her great black tail raised clear of the surface.

She swam round the harbour, visiting all the ships at anchor, always returning to a stream of fresh water near the railway station. It seemed that she had never been hunted, for she moved slowly and gently, showing no trace of fear when boats approached her. These were the whales which once lit the streets of many cities with their oil, and gave the whalebone from their mouths for the corsets of the world. Once they were abundant on the South African coast. But they were the "right" whales, and they paid for their trusting nature with their lives. Port Elizabeth has a right whale skeleton sixty-one feet long, so that the whale must have been a seventy-footer. As a fifty-foot right whale is considered large, the Port Elizabeth skeleton must be one of the largest ever secured.

Now comes the first of the rare and mysterious

whales, the pygmy right whale. Practically nothing is known of this little fellow (up to twenty feet in length) because he seldom appears; and when he does it is only in southern waters. Only three specimens have been recorded in South Africa. The first was caught at Simonstown forty years ago; and the magistrate telephoned the South African Museum, reporting that the fishermen had it in a shed on the beach and were charging one shilling admission.

“It’s a nuisance – I want to get rid of it,” declared the magistrate. Dr. Peringuey was away, but Drury the taxidermist guessed that something unusual was being displayed and hurried to the spot. Indeed there was a strong whale aroma on the beach. Drury persuaded the fishermen to carry the whale to the nearest railway line, and the stationmaster sent a truck for it. Thus it reached the museum safely.

“I did it all off my own bat,” Drury told me. “The pygmy right whale was something entirely new in South Africa, and so valuable that we put it into a special case enclosed in glass so that no one could tamper with it. I believe it is the only complete specimen in the world.”

This is the sort of treasure which makes other

museum directors envious. Scientists were bitterly disappointed when a second specimen, stranded at Gordon’s Bay, was found burnt on the municipal rubbish heap. Two ribs were saved. This whale has seventeen pairs of peculiar wide ribs; possibly an aid to resisting pressure at great depths.

The third pygmy right whale swam among the bathers at Fish Hoek in January, 1957, and naturally caused a panic. Fishermen went after it with a net, and the dark grey creature, ten feet long, was caught and clubbed. It had about six hundred pounds of meat on it, which the fishermen cut up and ate, caring nothing for the fact that they were eating pygmy right whale, some of the rarest meat in the world.

Humpbacks reach South African waters in May, and try to find a safe and secluded bay to calve. These ugly customers have no real hump, but they round their backs when they dive, giving a false impression. They enjoy leaping clear of the water, and you can hear them slapping one another miles away in the mating season.

You cannot mistake the sperm whale or cachelot, for it has an enormous head. Its body is usually

scarred by the tentacles of the gigantic squids and cuttlefish which it feeds upon. The sperm, like the right whale, has a rare pygmy relative. Some naturalist with a sense of humour named the pygmy sperm *Kogia breviceps*, the kogia being a scientific form of “codger”, while breviceps describes the short head, only one-sixth the body length. Thirteen feet is probably the maximum length.

This is a world-wide species, but relatively few have been found; only about sixteen in Cape waters. However, it is probably the only whale that has been shot by a policeman. That incident occurred at Muizenberg one night in 1956, when a “mysterious creature” was reported to be struggling in the shallows near the pavilion. The policeman waded in boldly with his revolver. Fishermen, as usual, ate the meat.

Some whales have beaks, and some beaked whales rank as extreme rarities. Among, these is Gray’s beaked whale, entirely unknown in South African waters until a fifteen-footer was washed up in 1910 near Cape Recife. (The late Mr. F. W. Fitzsimons, who claimed the skeleton for the Port Elizabeth Museum, identified it as Sowerby’s beaked whale; but I think Dr. Barnard’s verdict in favour of Gray’s

is correct.) A second specimen died after fouling some wharf piles in Table Bay Docks two years later. This skull is in the South African Museum, with a later skull from Mossel Bay.

Mr. J. E. Joubert of the South African Railways was beachcombing at Swakopmund ten years ago when he discovered a skull which baffled him completely. He sent it to a Cape Town newspaper with the query: “What sort of bird is this?” The beak had deceived him. It was another skull of Gray’s beaked whale. Thousands of years ago this species was plentiful, but it has almost died out. Its habits and movements are unknown. Fossilised remains have been found as far apart as the Cape Peninsula and Britain.

Layard’s beaked whale, named after a former curator of the South African Museum, is the mystery animal of the beaked whales. Adult males display the most remarkable teeth, an enigma of evolution which no one has solved. The upper jaw has no teeth, but on each side of the lower jaw grows a long tooth, curving upwards and backwards, crossing over the beak in such a way that the whale can only just open its mouth a few inches.

When the first whale of this species was found about a century ago it was regarded as a freak. About half a dozen others have been found since then, all having the same strap-like ivory teeth; so it is clear that the teeth are normal, and that Layard's whale feeds exclusively on small creatures. The only solution of the riddle I have seen was offered by Fitzsimons, who suggested that Nature was trying to prevent the whale from choking itself by taking too large a lump of food into its mouth.

Mankind has massacred the whale for centuries, but even now, with whale hunting almost as safe as fox hunting, the whale appears as a danger to man. A small whale, the killer, which naturalists used to call *Orca gladiator*, is regarded as the most ferocious animal in all the seas.

It was a killer that rammed the fishing-boat *Savage* in False Bay during July, 1956, causing the deaths of four men. Skipper Sarel Strydom, one of the two survivors, said that the whale lifted the whole boat out of the water when it struck. Pieces of skin and flesh from the killer's snout were found embedded in the splintered planking when the *Savage* was beached later. Probably the shock diverted the killer's attention from the man; for it is well known

that a killer will eat a human being as gladly as it will swallow a seal. The four men of the *Savage* who died were suffering from exposure. They had life-jackets, but the cold water was too much for them.

Male killer whales run up to thirty feet in length. They are often mistaken for sharks, as they have high, pointed dorsal fins. Hunting in packs, they will attack the largest whale, leaping into the air to confuse the victim while the boldest of them make for the mouth, seize the lips in their massive teeth, and rip them off as deliberately as a fishmonger would fillet a sole. Their object is to tear out the quivering tongue, and often they are successful. Then they leave the wounded whale to its fate.

A favourite trick of a pack of killers is to take a whale calf from its mother. They show no mercy. Live, warm meat is preferred to cold fish. Thirteen porpoises and fourteen seals were once found in the stomach of a killer whale. It had choked to death while trying to swallow the fifteenth seal. No wonder seals and porpoises have been observed racing from open water and throwing themselves on to beaches rather than face the fury of a killer pack.

Large whales, especially sperms, will charge not only boats but steam whalers. I remember a gunner in one of the Saldanha whalers hitting a sperm, which turned and showed fight. With jaws wide open it rushed at the ship, collided violently with the stern, and snapped off two propeller blades. The whale died and was taken to the station. And the steam whaler had to go into dry-dock in Cape Town for repairs.

Undine, a steam trawler working from Mossel Bay, was charged by a humpback off Bull Point in January, 1928. It seemed that the whale was annoyed by the nets. So great was the impact that the trawler swung round, the nets were torn to shreds and the catch was lost.

Come back to the small whales and study the pilot whale for a moment. This may reach twenty-eight feet in length, and Barnard says it is rare in Cape waters. Nevertheless, I have found a record of the stranding of seventy-five “black fish” in 1861 between the Kariega and Bushman river mouths. (“Black fish” is the popular but inappropriate name of the black pilot whale.) They were whales, all right, and the *Cape Chronicle* reported that a good haul of oil was secured. Pilot whales have a fatal

“follow my leader” habit which has often ended the lives of huge schools.

I found another good story in an old Cape Town newspaper of a sailor who noticed something in the surf in Table Bay, ran into the water, and found it was a pilot whale. Every sailor carries a sheath knife, and this man stabbed the whale just below the flipper where he judged the heart to be. Others came to his aid and he succeeded in landing the whale. It yielded a ton of oil.

Dolphins and porpoises are mammals belonging to the whale family, and here confusion often arises. Different naturalists in Britain and the United States have given varying definitions; so that the layman does not know which way to turn. The chaos becomes more bewildering when you remember that an oceanic dolphin fish, *Coryphaena hippuras*, is caught occasionally in Cape waters. Let me straighten out this issue. Forget the fish and concentrate on the mammals.

Norman and Fraser of the British Museum (Natural History) laid it down that the porpoises were the small, beakless members of the dolphin family with triangular dorsal fin and spade shaped teeth.

Dolphin covers the rest of the family except the killers and other large forms which are really small whales.

No porpoises (according to this definition) are found in South African waters. We have half a dozen or more dolphin species, all with slender teeth unlike those of the porpoise. The common dolphin, a six-footer, is the creature you see sporting round the bows of ships at sea. Heaviside's dolphin (also known by the euphonious name of the Tonine) is a small, rare dolphin, reported only in Cape seas. Heaviside was a shipmaster in the British East India Company who collected many interesting specimens. His dolphin is black with unusual white markings below. Mr. R. W. Rand, the South African authority on seals, shot a Heaviside's dolphin off Sea Point not long ago.

Then there is the bottle-nose dolphin. This has been found on the Natal coast five times, but has been identified only once at the Cape in recent years, by a skeleton on Noordhoek beach. However, I have found a reference to two bottle-nose "whales" (which can only have been bottle-nose dolphins) brought in by the Kalk Bay fishermen in 1879. They called them "keelers". The whole fishing

community settled down to a great feast, with tragic results, for the flesh had become tainted in some way and twenty-eight people died.

Nevertheless, dolphins have been eaten at the Cape for centuries. A twelve-footer weighing over three hundred pounds was shot in the Duncan Dock, Table Bay, a few years ago, soaked in vinegar and turned into biltong. It resembles beef biltong when treated in this way. Dolphins are caught by the Table Bay line fishing boats occasionally and sold to the stallholders at the fish market to be cut up into steaks. (A full-grown dolphin fetches about twenty shillings.) Dolphins were protected during World War I, but the proclamation lapsed many years ago.

Bottle-nose dolphins are among the fastest creatures in the sea, and possibly the finest jumpers. They will leap clear across an open boat in a twenty-foot jump, well over the heads of the crew. And if you study their antics in a zoo you will find them almost as intelligent as sea lions.

Watch the dolphin chasing small fish in Table Bay and you observe a creature which comes as close as any to the incarnation of the spirit of joy. New

Zealanders became so fond of their dolphin known as Pelorus Jack, which escorted ships, that they passed a special Act of Parliament to protect him. Pelorus Jack was a Risso's Dolphin, so rare in Cape waters that the skull in the South African Museum is the only specimen; and that is a skull without a record, which may easily have come from somewhere else.

Seamen regard the dolphin as a friend. It has been reported that they have driven sharks away from shipwreck survivors in lifebelts, and that they have pushed drowning men towards the shore. I am afraid the stories of the friendship of dolphins for humans are among the classic myths, with no more substance than Galatea, the sea-nymph. However, it is true to say that dolphins and porpoises are friendly to this extent, that they have never attacked a human being.

Whaling in South African waters is a story full of triumphs and disasters and unexpected dramas. It is not easy to uncover these pages. Parts of the story died with the men who hunted the whales in open boats. I knew some of those men, and I have also searched many an old volume and notebook and

newspaper file to reveal the saga.

In some southern countries, even in Tierra de Fuego, the primitive natives hunted whales in canoes and scared them into shallow water, where they died. South Africa had no seafaring native race. The Hottentots loved whale oil, but they relied entirely on stranded whales for their supply.

First of all the Cape whale hunters was Paulo de Gama, who sailed under his brother Vasco on the famous voyage of and chased a whale in St. Helena Bay. Paulo had foolishly made the whale line fast to a thwart in the boat. He harpooned the whale, and away it went and would have dragged them under if the boat had not stranded on a sandbank. That saved them, the whale became exhausted, and all hands had whale-meat as well as fresh fish and crawfish.

Sir Henry Middleton brought a scurvy-stricken English fleet into Table Bay early in the seventeenth century, short of food and oil. "A swarm of lame and diseased cripples," Middleton called his crews. However, they secured meat from the Hottentots and then they went after the whales. "They in the *Susan's* boat struck their harping iron into one of them very sure," Middleton wrote. "The

whale, feeling herself wounded, towed the boat for the space of half an hour up and down the bay with such swiftness that the men were fain to go all of them and sit in the stern and let the whale tow them, which was with such swiftness that she seemed to fly.”

They had to cut the rope and let the whale go. Another boat harpooned a young whale, however, while the mother remained close by. “The great whale would not depart from the little one, although it had received many wounds, but stood to the last to fight it out with all our boats – sometimes giving one boat a blow, and sometimes another, and would come under our boats and lift them almost out of the water. When the young whale began to get weary the old one would take the young upon his back and carry him.” In spite of this devotion the young whale was killed, and there was oil for the whole English fleet. A regular whaling and sealing industry was started by English seamen not long afterwards.

Standish, who wrote a description of the “Cape de Bona Essperannca” at that period, described an exciting incident during a service as his ship was leaving Table Bay: “In the sermone tyme we see a

whalle in feight with a sword fish and a thresher (probably a killer whale). The whalle did so roare that he did much interrupt the preacher in his sermon, that most of his audience did more regard the whalle and the fishe than they did his instructions.”

French visitors took a few whales in Saldanha Bay, cutting them up on Schapen Island, which they called Isle a la Biche. Van Riebeeck’s men also killed a few, but the Dutch were not keen whaler men. “Many whales in the bay, apparently tame and easily caught, if only we had time,” Van Riebeeck remarked. Later he reported “whales by thousands” (certainly an exaggeration), and blowing so close to the fort that they kept him awake at night. He added that a shortage of harpoons and casks kept him from hunting them.

Perhaps you remember another vivid scene from the diary, when Van Riebeeck and his wife sauntered along the beach to Salt River mouth, where a dead whale had washed ashore. Van Riebeeck climbed on top of it and called to the trumpeter to play “Wilhelmus van Nassauwen”. Meanwhile the Hottentots were carrying off the oil in the hollow stems of sea-bamboo.

Simon van der Stel was a harpooner himself. He took part in several whale hunts; and on one occasion the whale towed his boat so far out that they were caught in a north-west gale and had to cut the rope to save their lives.

English and American whalers operated in Cape waters at a time when the Dutch East India Company would not allow the colonists to hunt the whale. American “spouters” were at work on the coast long before the eighteenth century ended. That was a rough and picturesque era. St. Helena Island was the great meeting place of the American whalers, but St. Helena Bay near Saldanha was their favourite anchorage on the Cape coast. I have seen a statement by Hendrik Bundle, who lived at St. Helena Bay towards the end of the eighteenth century, stating that one year “there were so many whales that the Americans merely cut off their heads for the whalebone and let the carcasses with the blubber float away”. Bundle said that about twenty ships secured altogether about four hundred whales in three months.

American whalers put into Table Bay, too, and their crews were as much at home in the waterfront taverns as they were in the Antarctic ice. All sorts

of men came on shore from the whalers; Portuguese and half-castes from the Cape Verde Islands and the Azores, Eskimos and Negroes, all the Scandinavian races, even tattooed kanakas from the Pacific islands. Inevitably some ran away and settled in cosmopolitan Cape Town. Many a New Bedford and Nantucket whaler was sunk by the *Alabama* during the American Civil War; but the survivors called at the Cape, and such famous ships as the *Wanderer* and *Charles W. Morgan* were calling at South African ports right up to the end of the days of sail.

Among the first professional naturalists to study the whale on the shores of the Cape was Pierre-Antoine Delalande. This zealous Frenchman gave his name to a number of animals, including Delalande’s fox and the crawfish, *Palinurus lalandii*. He spent two months dissecting a right whale on a beach in the Eastern Cape “in the scorching sun, and despite the appalling and infectious stench”. This was the first complete whale skeleton which the Paris Museum received. For a time it was known as *Balaena lalandii*, but the earlier name of *Balaena australis* was restored later. Delalande died soon after his return to France. It seems that his hardships

while preparing the whale skeleton and other specimens hastened his death.

Cape Town's whaling pioneers were Fehrson and Truter. They not only hunted from the shore, but towards the end of the eighteenth century they acquired *De Helerstellen*, a three-masted, seagoing vessel for whaling. (She was captured by the British on the way to Holland with a valuable cargo of oil.) These enterprising partners made soap in Cape Town from whale oil, using a formula which included seaweed from Table Bay and a patent deodorant. In spite of all their efforts, the whale soap retained an offensive aroma. Fehrson and Truter might have sold it during the period of wartime shortages; but unhappily for them a captured ship was brought in with a sweet smelling cargo of fancy soap.

John Murray, an English merchant, bought out Fehrson and Truter at public auction. His name crops up in the whaling records for a number of years. When a Dutch monopoly took over the whaling after the First British Occupation, compensation was granted to Murray in the shape of twenty-three slaves. However, the monopoly became "spoils of war" a few years later, and

Murray returned to whaling. Murray's Bay at Robben Island was his headquarters until Makana, the Xosa prophet, and thirty other prisoners escaped in one of Murray's whale boats. Then he had to move across to the mainland, to the bay in front of the Somerset Hospital.

Other whale boats were kept in readiness at Rogge Bay and Papendorp, while the most important station in False Bay was owned by Miller of Miller's Point. Many a whale was cut up on the flat rock at Seaforth where only the flesh of sun-bathers is seen nowadays. A huge "trying-out" cauldron was unearthed there some years ago, relic of the days when several large blubber pots stood on the beach.

Muntingh, a Table Bay whaler man of the early nineteenth century, imported boats and equipment from Greenland. Frederick Kirsten was whaling at Algoa Bay and Thwaites at Fish Hoek. The South African Commercial Advertiser reported a "tolerable season" in 1830, with fifteen whales captured in all the Cape bays, the total value being £3,500. One man had been killed by a whale at Fish Hoek.

George Biddlecombe was the victim of a whaling

accident in Table Bay a few years later. Have you heard of Biddlecombe? He was one of Dick King's men, one of the crew of the boats in which King sailed up and down the Natal coast in dangerous times. Biddlecombe was bow oarsman in a whale-boat that was knocked to pieces when a harpooned whale rose beneath it. The whale line became coiled round his body, and the whale dragged him to his death.

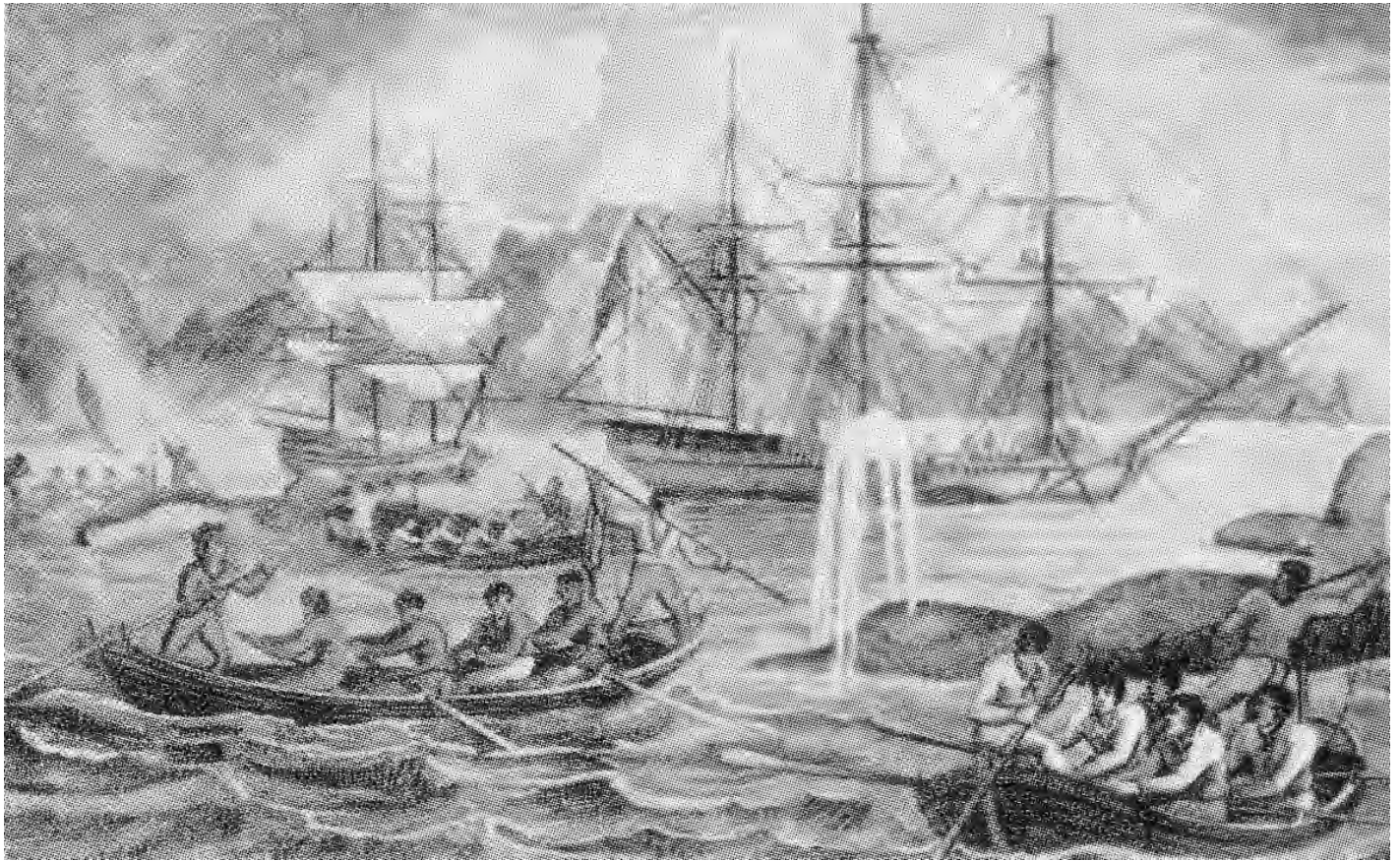
Whaling enjoyed many prosperous years during the first half of the nineteenth century. One report stated that whaling came after farming and wine as the third most valuable industry.

Plettenberg Bay was mentioned as a whaling base in 1883, the year when foreign whalers were forbidden to operate in South African waters. It was still a whaling base within living memory. Captain John Sinclair started it, using American boats. Towards the end of last century came Watson, a St. Helena islander, who had four boats named *Dreadnought*, *Swift*, *Swallow* and *Scorpion*. He built a slipway on the present hotel site on Beacon Island, and seven iron cauldrons were filled with blubber. Charlie Petersen kept a lookout from the Robberg heights.

One afternoon several young girls were bathing near the whale slipway. A whale had been moored in the sea before being cut up, and two of the girls swam out to it and climbed on to the whale's head. They lost their grip as a wave swept over them, and in a moment both of them had fallen into the whale's enormous mouth. The mouth was so slippery that they could not find a foothold anywhere; and they were afraid of being suffocated if the great jaws closed. Fortunately the father of one of the girls heard their cries and hauled them to safety. But it took them days to wash the grease from their hair.

Watson hunted his last whale half a century ago. It was a Sunday morning (according to Angus McCallum who told me the story) and some of the whaler men were in church, listening to Parson Breach's sermon. Someone entered the church and whispered the news that there was a large whale in the bay. Watson and his crew tip-toed out, and got their boat away. McCallum followed as soon as he could gather his crew.

By this time Watson had struck, the harpoon was fast in a right whale, and he and his crew of nine



Whaling enjoyed many prosperous years during the first half of the nineteenth century. One report stated that whaling came after farming and wine as the Cape's third most valuable industry.

men were being towed round Cape Seal and out of sight. No one ever saw them again. The widows of those men hoped against hope, for months, that the crew had been towed out to sea and picked up by a sailing ship; and that one day they would return. Sometime later a Plettenburg Bay character known as “Old Jack the Sailor” dreamt that a fragment of the missing whale-boat *Scorpion* would be found between Groot Brak and Knysna Heads. And so it was; a portion of the *Scorpion*’s planking, identified by the copper patching hammered on by Watson after the boat had been cracked by a whale’s tail.

“And we took it for the judgment of the Lord for going out whaling on a Sunday,” declared old Angus McCallum. “From that time on, no boat went out on the Sabbath.”

Norwegians arrived with seven steam whalers soon after Watson disappeared, and there was no more of the open-boat hunting. Their little ships were all converted for minesweeping during World War I, and that ended the Plettenburg Bay whaling industry.

St. Helena Bay was the whaling base of the McLachlan brothers a century ago. I find that they

once caught a “sulphur-bottom” whale (blue whale) which measured ninety-four feet and yielded twenty-five leaguers of oil valued at five hundred pounds.

Always you find the accidents. The schooner *Telegraph*, a Cape Town vessel, was sailing along the Namaqualand coast when she collided with a fin whale. The schooner staggered at the impact, but this was no tragedy and she reached port safely. Whale hunters in False Bay were not so lucky. In one accident a whale upset a boat and one of the crew, a young Swede, was taken by a man-eating shark.

Two whales menaced a diving boat in Simonstown dockyard early this century, and one whale fouled the boat’s moorings. Bombs were dropped to kill the whale so that the carcass could be removed.

As a contrast with the many tragic whaling episodes are the records of whales killed without danger. Once a baby whale approached the old Central jetty at the end of Adderley Street. The first harpoon finished it, and the carcass was towed to the fish jetty. “There it now lies with a tarpaulin for a winding sheet,” wrote a reporter. “It is supposed to

be about a fortnight old, and to have strayed from its mother, who is now possibly in a distracted condition searching the southern seas for her offspring.”

A forty-five foot whale was once found embedded in the sand on Kalk Bay beach. It had wandered into shallow water and had not been able to regain the open sea. The fishermen soon killed it.

Natal’s first modern whaling station at the Bluff, Durban opened fifty years ago, and two years later the two companies operating there killed five hundred whales in the season. A blue whale ninety-five feet in length was hauled up on the Bluff slipway.

Saldanha Bay first saw steam whalers in June, 1909, when the leader of a Norwegian expedition returning from the Antarctic at the end of the summer decided to hunt in Cape waters. They had the three thousand ton factory ship *Svend Foyn* anchored off Meeuw Island, and two catchers, *Prey* and *Frig*. In three weeks they took thirty-three whales, an encouraging start.

Another expedition reached Saldanha Bay from Norway during the same season under Johann

Bryde, discoverer of Bryde’s whale. Bryde used a wooden steamer, the *Vale*, as factory ship. His first catchers were the tiny *Neptune* and the *Falcon*. It was a humble start, yet within four years Bryde had sold oil worth one hundred thousand pounds.

Bryde built the first modern South African shore whaling station, at Donkergat, on land leased from Sir Henry de Villiers. He sank his old *Vale* and the three-masted barque *Matilda* to form a jetty. Donkergat had been a quarantine station in years gone by, and I have often studied the inscriptions on the gravestones. Not only victims of smallpox and plague, but other seamen are buried there. No one has ever been able to tell me the origin of the name Donkergat, a sinister name for a pleasant bay within the southern arm of Saldanha.

Salvorsens of Leith, those Scots of Norwegian descent, put up the Salamander Bay whaling station close to Donkergat at the same period. I remember the wood and iron buildings of a design never seen in South Africa before. And no wonder; they had been dismantled in Iceland and put together again on this far shore. Hans Ellefsen was the first manager, and some still call the old place “Ellefsen’s station”.

At the end of every southern summer an armada of whales moves north from the Antarctic and splits up into two armadas at Cape Point. Saldanha snipes at the west coast whales. Shortly before World War I the Southern Cross whaling company was formed to put up a station at Hangklip and intercept the whales bound for the east coast. Manager of this enterprise was a kindly but ill-fated Norwegian sea captain named Hans Jorgensen. (I knew him when he was manager at Donkergat, where years of inactivity brought about his sad end.) Eight whalers operated from Hangklip, and in their best season they brought in more than four hundred whales.

One of the Hangklip whalers harpooned an eighty-four blue whale which first dived, then rose, leapt clear of the surface and made straight for the ship. The whale struck a glancing blow on the bows, then battered the ship again and again. It was clear that either the whale must be killed or the ship might be lost, and the gunner lost no time in hitting back. Four harpoons were fired before the whale was killed. They wiped the sweat from their foreheads that day and swore that all the dangers of whaling had not departed.

Sharks, the hungry False Bay sharks, waited for the

whales to come in to Hangklip, and tore off the blubber before the whales could be hauled up on the slipway. Jorgensen baited a float with whale meat poisoned with strychnine. It was useless. Still the sharks preyed on the dead whales. Then he tried arsenic and this wiped out the sharks.

Cape whaling firms have known many vicissitudes; they have experienced triumph and disaster with the rise and fall in the price of whale oil. Always it is exciting. I went back to Donkergat shortly before World War II and found myself among the Vikings again. They were much younger than the men who took me out hunting soon after World War I. One gunner I met was just over thirty, mates, engineers., seamen were in their twenties.

“We move faster now, with oil-burning catchers,” a gunner told me. “Great sport – no one ever gets tired of watching the chase. But the great blue whales have gone. And the sperm. We shall be hunting fin to keep the blubber pots full this season.”

I went there again twenty years, later. The great blue whales that I had seen harpooned in the old days were indeed rare; but the *sei* were coming in

and four catchers had killed twenty-three sperm in one day! They were talking of using aircraft to spot the whales, so that even more would be caught. Well, I seldom hear anything new anymore. One of my friends flew out whale spotting from Saldanha over thirty years ago. No radio. One engine, not always reliable. No long-range tanks. No rubber dinghy. Just a life-jacket, a whaling skipper as observer, and a Very pistol for signalling. No aerodrome. Only the beach at Langebaan, with soft patches to tip the old DH 6 over on her nose.

But I liked the old whaling days, and I missed the old gunners. I missed the Penguin and her skipper, too. Penguin was a queer little composite ship, a hull with a funnel from one scrapped vessel, a mast from another and an engine which old Captain King always described as of “one candle power”. She was used for carrying fresh water from Oostenwal, up the lagoon, to Donkergat; just about as safe a voyage as you could make anywhere. It was too much for the Penguin. One day she was bucking into a north-wester with her heavy load of fresh water when she dived into a sea and went straight to the bottom. Fortunately she was in the shallows. They raised her, and made her into a jetty at

Langebaan.

Great days, the whaling days. I am fond of comfort now, but I shall never regret going out in the cold dawn from Saldanha with Morch Olsen and hearing the cry from the masthead barrel as a sperm whale rose far to starboard: “Bla-a-a-ast!”

I saw great exploits and heard strange tales. The strangest tale of all is told by gunners who have seen many sperm whales die. Nearly always, they say, the old sperm will turn in the bloody foam at the very last, obeying some unknown instinct, and lift up his dying eyes to the sun.

Chapter 5

EVERY BEACHCOMBER'S DREAM

EVERY STRETCH of the South African coast has its legendary treasure, every beachcomber has dreamed of finding wealth. I have had personal experience of such quests. Before you invest in a treasure syndicate, however, I would like you to consider one point which may not have occurred to you, but which you should bear in mind.

Years ago I watched an old diver risking his life in the surf among the rocks of the Cape coast. He brought up nothing that day; but in the hotel bar afterwards he gave me the piece of information which I have never forgotten. "Some divers," he said, "find all sorts of interesting things on the bottom and then come up empty-handed. When all the excitement is over they go quietly back to the spot and do a little profitable diving on their own account."

So you must pick your diver carefully. Newspapers often report the failures, but successful treasure hunts sometimes go unrecorded.

You should also remember that not every sunken treasure chest is worth recovering. On a calm day I

could show you the wreck of a Dutch East Indiaman which still gives up a few coins after winter gales; the silver coins known as ducatoons. But seldom is it worth while paying a diver to recover a box of silver. Diamonds and gold are much better, if you can find them. When the treasure has been buried on shore, of course, you can afford to be less particular and set out spade in hand to find the cache.

I like the treasure legend of Vergelegen at Somerset West. It has the ring of truth about it, and the searcher in the Cape archives will find evidence supporting the old tale of the *Schoonberg's* gold and jewels and bars of silver. By sheer chance I discovered further sidelights in long-forgotten newspaper files.

Nearly two and half centuries have passed since the Dutch ship *Schoonberg* ran ashore near Cape Agulhas in fine, clear, summer weather. Some reports said this was due to the negligence of her officers. It was suspected, however, that Captain Albertus van Soest had wrecked his ship deliberately so that he and other conspirators might steal valuable items of cargo. The ship took the sand gently in Struys Bay and all hands waded on

shore safely.

She was loaded mainly with tea from Batavia, and she also carried pepper, eastern timber, bales of silk – and exquisitely transportable boxes of gold and precious stones, silver and ornaments. A strong south-easter raged the day after the wreck, and the *Schoonberg* began to pound and break up.

Some of the ship's company marched along the shore until they came to the Bot River mouth. There they met a farmer who had just shot a hippo, and the castaways were glad to join him in a feast. Captain van Soest remained on the spot until word of the wreck brought his fellow conspirators to Agulhas with ox-wagons. Then the cavalcade left for Cape Town loaded with selected cargo from the wreck.

Van Soest's accomplices were Jacob van der Heyden of Vergelegen, Hendrik Klopper and Jacob Malan. (Van der Heyden and Klopper had bought the famous Vergelegen farm after Willem Adrian van der Stel had been recalled to Holland.) It seems that the conspirators buried most of the valuables at Vergelegen, handing over the rest to Governor de Chavonnes to allay suspicion.

Nevertheless, the Governor was suspicious. He did not understand how an experienced master could have, thrown away his ship in calm weather. He regarded it as something more than a coincidence that the ox-wagons from Vergelegen should have made straight for the wreck. His inquiries proved that Captain van Soest had visited Vergelegen on several previous occasions, and that the captain had smuggled tobacco and rum with the aid of the farmers. Finally the Governor learnt that seamen from the lost ship had been spending gold and silver in the taverns of Cape Town.

Governor de Chavonnes sent Valk, the harbour master, and Jan de la Fontaine, senior merchant, to the wreck to see whether anything more could be salvaged. They found only the bones of the *Schoonberg*, for she had been set on fire and burnt down to the waterline. So the Governor ordered the arrest of Captain van Soest and his accomplices. According to one authority, the crime preyed on the mind of Hendrik Klopper, who committed suicide. Captain van Soest was sentenced to death and broken on the wheel. Van der Heyden and Malan were deported in chains to Batavia. They declared that only Klopper knew where the treasure had been

buried. As they remained unshaken in this statement after being tortured, the Governor reluctantly accepted their word and ordered them to be deported to Batavia in chains. And the missing treasure of the *Schoonberg* remained in its hiding place on Vergelegen.

No doubt the farm was searched again and again. I found details of one search, reported in the *Cape Argus* of October, 1859. The writer stated that a ship's bell and copper kettle had been found near the homestead by labourers digging up roots of old trees. The bell, engraved with the name *Schoonberg*, was to be seen on the farm of Mr. P. van der Byl at Eerste River. According to the reporter, the farmer who buried the treasure had been assisted by a servant named Nicolaas Niemaan, and a slave boy. The slave boy had been shot. Niemaan had run away, crossed the colonial frontier and lived among the kaffirs for many years. Before he died Niemaan had met a white man named Verley and told him that the treasure had been buried in the orchard behind the Vergelegen homestead.

Thus the search in 1859 recorded in the *Cape Argus* was based on Verley's information. The reporter

saw a hole fifteen feet deep, but nothing had been found. Perhaps the boxes of gold and precious stones, silver and ornaments are still there after nearly two and a half centuries. But if you remember the words of my friend the diver you will realise that people who find sunken or buried treasure do not always shout about it.

All along the Agulhas coast you hear tales of lost treasure, most of it sunken treasure, some of it buried in the sand. One party after another has searched the dunes round about Gansbaai for an iron chest which a Boer commando captured from the British. It was filled with money for paying the troops, and the men of the commando hid it in the dunes when they heard that strong British forces were approaching. Some children were supposed to have seen the chest during World War I, but the sand blew over it again and the money has never been recovered. A milkwood tree on which a cross was carved is said to be a clue to the treasure.

Farmers in the Bredasdorp district will show you with pride some of the furniture of the British troopship *Arniston*, lost in 1815 at Waenhuiskrans. Local fishermen claim to have located two of the ship's treasure chests in a deep cleft in the reef

where the ship went down. They may be right, but the tables of Burma teak, the chairs and settees which have been polished for generations; these are the only treasures the *Arniston* has yielded to the people of the shore. Her anchor and cable still lie rusting on a lonely beach. And there is a tablet at the scene of the wreck in memory of four young boys who were drowned. It is said that their mother made the long voyage from England to the Cape under sail, and then travelled by ox-wagon to Waenhuiskrans, to see the place where her children perished. Only six men survived the *Arniston* wreck, and nearly four hundred people, including fourteen women and twenty-five children, were drowned. Long afterwards a human finger bone was found, still encircled by an engagement ring.

Mossel Bay is the home of many treasure tales, and a poor man with a spade was rewarded there not long ago. It was in May, 1951, that old Dail Vaaltyn, a coloured man, was digging a trench in the park when he found a large coin. Vaaltyn then turned up the earth at a faster pace than ever before. He dug up coin after coin until it became clear that nothing more remained in that area. Vaaltyn then handed the whole collection over to the police, and

the official list revealed thirteen gold coins of British, Prussian, Dutch and Belgian origin, and dozens of silver, copper and bronze pieces. Someone had stolen a collection of coins from the Mossel Bay library four years previously, but this collection did not tally with the missing coins. Vaaltyn's coins went back to the year 1700, and the most recent bore the year 1877. Some of the coins were scorched, as though they had been in a fire. Burnt scraps of paper money were found with the coins, but these could not be identified. No one claimed the hoard, and so after six months, the collection was handed over to Dail Vaaltyn.

An old-fashioned dagger, found in a dune just outside Mossel Bay, formed the origin of a pirate's treasure tale. Another legend (which Dr. H. E. S. Fremantle, M.L.A., investigated) was based on the visit of an eighteenth-century treasure ship. While the captain and officers were on shore hunting buck, the crew seized the chests filled with money and jewels, buried the loot on shore and then ran the ship on the rocks. The guilty seamen dispersed and escaped detection. Years afterwards one of them returned to Mossel Bay, and very soon he was spending money liberally. This man was said to

have told a minister of religion the whole story. The man died. Sometime later the minister went out with a spade to find the two treasure chests described by the dying man. One iron chest was unearthed, but it was empty. Mossel Bay treasure hunters are still seeking the other chest.

Valuable flotsam came to Mossel Bay in 1824, when the English ship *Mary* was wrecked there. A beachcomber known as “Mossel Bay Jack”, a former British sailor, was living there at the time, gathering oysters and selling shells for lime-burning to the farmers at three rix-dollars a wagon load. “Mossel Bay Jack” roamed the beaches every day after the loss of the *Mary*; and aided by bands of Hottentots he gathered many chests of indigo dye stuffs. These he exchanged at Captain Hallett’s store for groceries and spirits, especially spirits.

Sail on eastwards to Ballot’s Bay, on the coast six miles from George, and you may survey the scene of the Von Mollendorf treasure legend. This is so persistent, and it has come down through the years with so much detail, that one can hardly escape the feeling that a treasure of some value was indeed lost when Von Mollendorf floated to the shore on a raft.

Joseph Wilhelm von Mollendorf, son of a Prussian field marshal, came to South Africa towards the end of the eighteenth century. He transhipped at Cape Town, but the vessel which carried him round the coast has not been identified with certainty. She may have been the Dutch East India ship *Maria*, which put into Plettenburg Bay in 1788 with her crew suffering from scurvy. A south-east gale drove her away from the anchorage, and she was wrecked farther along the coast.

About the man Von Mollendorf there is no doubt at all. His treasure may have become exaggerated with the years, but his descendants believe that he had the equivalent of many thousands of pounds in gold coin and jewels in his iron strongbox. When the ship went down he made a raft, placed his strongbox on it and drifted hopefully towards the entrance of the bay now known as Ballot’s Bay.

Ballot’s Bay is a rocky cove with a narrow entrance partly barred by a submerged reef. The sea breaks heavily on the reef at times, but there are calm days when fishing boats can use the entrance in safety. According to legend, Von Mollendorf lost his box on the reef. He was able to save his life, but his arm was shattered and had to be amputated.

For weeks after his recovery Von Mollendorf haunted the little bay, mourning over his lost wealth. Local farmers heard his tale and tried to help him. In calm weather they could see the iron box wedged between two boulders about fifteen feet below the surface; but they were unable to raise it.

Von Mollendorf never became resigned to his loss. He married an Afrikaner girl on the farm Kommandokraal in the Oudtshoorn district; and often he took his children to the little bay and told them of the wealth that would be theirs if only he could reach the box. But every attempt failed.

Van der Westhuizen, a farmer who married one of Von Mollendorf's descendants towards the end of last century, carried on the quest. He also made inquiries in Germany, secured a portrait of Field-Marshal Wichard Heinrich von Mollendorf, and collected a number of documents. Van der Westhuizen was also said to have traced a fortune owned by Joseph Wilhelm von Mollendorf, a fortune untouched and awaiting claimants in a German bank. But this determined man seems to have disappeared while the South African War was being fought. The last of the Von Mollendorfs in

South Africa died about half a century ago.

Many people declare that they have seen Von Mollendorf's box. Mr. Edward Robertson of Sandkraal farm, in the neighbourhood, has stated that one salvage party rigged a cable across the entrance to Ballot's Bay and sent a diver down. The diver hoped to steady himself with the aid of a rope and pulley running on the cable, but the current was too strong and the attempt was abandoned.

Ballot's Bay supported a fishing settlement years ago. It is a great place for *geelbek*, but the graves and the ruined cottages tell a grim tale of boats that capsized in the surf and families who decided that the risk was not worthwhile.

Some of those fishermen will tell you that Von Mollendorf's box is still there, and that Ballot's Bay will never give up its treasure. I am not so sure about that. There is another story of two Ballot's Bay fishing-boat owners who became suddenly rich and retired from the hard life of the coast. The sea is not always in turmoil. Wait long enough, and there comes a day and a tide when the most treacherous reefs may be approached without fear.

Stand on the scrub-covered heights of Robberg (the

Cape Seal of the charts) and look down into the bay which the Portuguese called Formosa and the Dutch named Plettenburg. Here it was that the galleon *Sao Gancalo* anchored more than three centuries ago on a voyage from India to Lisbon. She was leaking badly, and her master landed part of the cargo of rice so that the carpenters could reach the strained planking.

For two months the *Sao Goncalo* lay off the river mouth. Then a gale drove her on shore, and one hundred and thirty-three of her company perished. Her captain, a feeble old man, was on shore that day with five priests and about one hundred seamen. The narrative of the settlement they formed, and the boats they built, is part of the history of South Africa. But you will not find the story of the *Sao Goncalo*'s treasure chest in the history books. The late Miss Sanni Metelerkamp, a member of the Rex family of Knysna, gathered this legend from old Plettenburg Bay farmers and gave me the results of her inquiries.

It seems that Bushmen living in the Robberg caves discovered the iron-bound chest long afterwards on a lonely beach. It was embedded in sand and far too heavy to move. They told a white man about their

find, but when they returned to the spot some time later the sand had covered the chest again. Years later a farmer located the chest and went off for a team of oxen to haul it away. Once again sea and sand combined to hide the chest. After strong south-east winds, relics which are believed to have belonged to the *Sao Goncalo* are washed on to the Robberg beaches – semi-precious beads, old blue china and little tear bottles.

A man who deserves to find a chest of gold is Mr. H. G. Harraway of Port Elizabeth, a most determined treasure hunter. He has preserved many records and relics of the 1820 settlers, and this taste for history led him naturally into the field of wrecks and their stories.

First he secured a licence from the Commissioner of Customs to salvage four wrecks along the coast near Port Elizabeth. Then he searched the archives and other sources of information. Among his helpers were “Bunny” Hodges and other ex-soldiers, keen fishermen who knew the coast well; and they reported a strange object in a deep pool at Sardinia Bay near Cape Recife. They were puzzled because, unlike most submerged objects, this one was not encrusted with shellfish.

Harraway formed a theory that it must be of brass or bronze. Divers were sure it was a cannon. It was a most difficult salvage operation, for the sea was rough; but in the end the cannon weighing six thousand pounds was hauled up the beach and hidden in the dunes. Unfortunately the effort had been watched, and rumours of a treasure-chest went round the district. Vandals attempted to cut up the cannon with hack-saws for scrap metal, and the valuable old piece was mutilated.

Mr. Vernon S. Forbes, senior lecturer in geography at Rhodes University, Grahamstown, identified the cannon as one mentioned by Colonel J. R. Gordon, the Dutch explorer, while returning in 1778 from his famous Orange River journey. Gordon drew a panorama of the coast, and noted on it that he had found traces of a wreck at the very spot where the cannon was found. The survivors had built huts in the dunes, but had evidently died of hunger and thirst, for Gordon and his Hottentot servant buried a number of skeletons. "Two rusty anchors and a cannon lay in the sea, which I could not identify because of the waves," Gordon wrote. Not far away Gordon discovered a beautiful carved ivory box which appeared to be a Roman Catholic symbol.

Harraway sent all the available information to the curator of the artillery museum at Woolwich. Experts who examined the photographs described the cannon as a Dutch brass naval gun about three hundred years old. It is a rare specimen, possibly the only existing relic of the work of that fine craftsman, Conraet Wegt Woert. This historic cannon has been presented to the Port Elizabeth municipality. Harraway still hopes to recover further objects from the wreck.

A relic of Portuguese explorers came to light at Port Alfred in 1908, when a boarding-house was being rebuilt. It was an iron-bound box, and the hearts of the discoverers must have beat faster as they forced the lid. Bundles of paper which had been soaked in water were thrown away before any scientist could examine them. There remained a number of plaster of Paris fragments. When these were restored, they formed an image of the Virgin.

Professor E. H. L. Schwarz (of "Kalahari redemption" fame) took charge of the investigation, consulted the Portuguese records, and came to the conclusion that the box might have been left there by Bartholomew Diaz. He put forward an



It was a most difficult salvage operation, but in the end the cannon weighing six thousand pounds was hauled up on the beach.

alternative theory that the Portuguese used the Kowie river as a stronghold during their slaving expeditions, with Bushmen as their victims. The real treasure of that box was the paper which was destroyed before Professor Schwarz came on the scene.

One of those tantalising treasure stories published without names of people or exact details of places, yet bearing the obvious stamp of truth, appeared in the *Cape Argus* many years ago. While the Eighth Kaffir War was being fought there was a large garrison stationed in a village on or near the coast in the Eastern Province. The military pay office was an old building with a strong-room, always guarded by a sentry.

One day the sentry noticed that the pay clerk was in the habit of hanging the strong-room keys on a peg near the door. The sentry plotted with several friends; they waited their chance, and at last the absent-minded clerk left the key on the peg and went home.

Feverishly the soldiers worked to remove nearly forty thousand pounds in gold coin from the strong-room. They filled the wooden boxes with sand,

leaving a top layer of coins, then screwed up the boxes again.

That day a child had been buried in the little graveyard near the powder magazine. The thieves opened the grave, and above the coffin they buried bucket after bucket of golden sovereigns. Before daybreak the grave had been closed, the strong-room swept, keys replaced on the peg.

It seemed to be a perfect crime. Even when the theft was discovered soon afterwards (owing to an unexpected request for money from an outlying fort) the men on guard duty could not be shaken in their story that they knew nothing of the missing gold. At the court martial, however, the sentries were convicted of failure to carry out their duties while on active service, and every man was sentenced to transportation to Tasmania.

Twenty years later a map reached the Eastern Province from one of the convicts, showing where the money had been buried. A syndicate was formed, the graveyard (no longer in use) was located. They opened every grave in search of the treasure, but not one coin was found. Someone had been there before them.

If beads were really valuable, the people of the coast beyond East London would be wealthy. Many of the beads are cornelians, brown and transparent, cut by hand and drilled laboriously by hand; some elongated, some round, some shaped like diamonds. All beads washed up by the sea are known on this coast as “Grosvenor beads”, though they come from many old, forgotten wrecks.

One of the most respectable beachcombers I know makes a hobby of searching this coast whenever his firm releases him for a month. Always at low spring tides he finds natives scooping up the shale in flat tins, spreading it on the rocks, throwing sea water over it to wash off the light grit and sandstone. Then the beads are revealed.

Samples of the cornelian beads were sent to the British Museum authorities in London for examination. The report described them as beads of Indian origin at least two thousand years old. Some historians believe that the beads were carried by Phoenicians who sailed down the East African coast centuries before Christ and traded with the Pondoland tribes. It is significant that the Pondas have inherited memories, of “great white birds” that came by sea bringing strange men. It is possible,

however, that the visitors were Arab slave-traders. Pondo women wear necklaces of cornelian and other ancient, foreign beads to this day.

More exciting finds have been made in recent years at Haga Haga, thirty miles from East London, by Mrs M. W. Dunlop-Ainslie – nothing less than a collection of cut gems. One flawless diamond, nine rubies, an emerald and many cornelians have been picked up by Mrs Dunlop-Ainslie, all inside sea shells and covered with sand. Miss Courtenay-Latimer, director of the East London Museum, has made a number of expeditions to Haga Haga and has recovered several beautiful cut amethysts. Here again there is a legend of a chest wedged in the rocks and slowly giving up its treasure. The ship which carried the chest may have been the *San Diego*.

My friend the beachcomber found a quantity of blue Chinese porcelain bearing the maker’s name in Chinese characters. This was in perfect condition. He heard of silver doubloons being washed up, and natives showed him a beach which they called “the place where the money comes out of the sea”.

One great riddle of the coast near East London is

the inscribed rock at Kayser's Beach. Is this a clue to buried treasure? Many investigators hold that view, though no one has been able to give a satisfactory interpretation.

The rock stands midway between high and low water marks. Within a circle are various letters and figures. They must have been cut into the hard sandstone to a depth of six inches with a hammer and cold chisel, but weathering has reduced the depth to an inch. The inscription consists of a Portuguese cross and the letters N, NE, JN, L/L/LL (or 77/7/7) and a snake-like line.

Sir George Cory, the historian, studied the inscription about seventy years ago and sent photographs to the British Museum some time later. Experts there reported that it was a genuine old Portuguese inscription resembling others found on the South African coast. They were unwilling to commit themselves further. Miss Courtenay-Latimer put the riddle before some of the leading American archaeologists, and they declared that two of the letters formed a sign indicating a spring of fresh water. Another authority suggested that the letters JN might be the initials of the old Portuguese explorer Juan da Nova, discoverer of Mossel Bay

and certain islands in African waters.

Cory discovered three old graves in the neighbourhood. He also noted a native legend of shipwreck. Three ships known to have been lost on this stretch of coast were the *San Joao Baptista* in 1622, the *Nossa Senhora do Atalaya* and the *Sacramento*, both in 1647. Several attempts have been made to locate treasure. One seeker, a farmer named Gower, employed a witchdoctor, and dug a pit thirty feet deep at the spot selected three miles from the rock. He found nothing. It is possible that the inscription merely indicates a landing place with fresh water, but the old Portuguese went to a great deal of trouble when they made that mysterious carving.

Now here is the last of those iron-bound boxes which appear so prominently in these treasure legends. Durban people speak of "Treasure Beach" at the Bluff, and there is reason to believe that this beach has indeed yielded a fortune.

Eighty or ninety years ago a wreck was battered to pieces in the surf below the Bluff. A stumpy mast appeared at low spring tides for some years, and then a large iron-bound box was seen. Mr. O. E.

Bjorseth, an amateur fisherman, noticed the box in eight feet of water, prodded it, and in 1909 he decided to employ a diver. Unfortunately the diver was defeated by the surf. Years afterwards, however, the Durban newspapers reported that an Indian named Patel had picked up a copper cylinder full of diamonds, rubies and emeralds near the site of Bjorseth's box. The origin of this hoard was never settled, but the stones fetched twenty thousand pounds. Patel received half that amount and the rest went to the government.

Finally, a word about the much-discussed *Grosvenor* treasure. I would not invest in any Grosvenor syndicate now because I believe that the main treasure was recovered years ago. A man at Port St. Johns collected so many silver coins from the wreck that he was able to melt them down and have them made into a large and handsome cup. He was one of many successful treasure hunters of the early days.

The men who started lifting the riches of the Grosvenor were Captain Sidney Turner and Lieutenant Beddoes of the Natal Pioneers. Turn up the files of the Natal Mercury for May, 1880, and you will find the story of their efforts. They had a

team of natives, they blasted the wreck with dynamite, and they found gold coins, silver and jewellery. Others followed, but not all of them talked to the newspapers. Remember my friend the diver? You should think of him before joining a treasure expedition. Some treasure tales were true, and many an empty iron-bound chest lies on the ocean floor.

What happens if you do find treasure trove? Roman-Dutch law in South Africa is clear enough. If you find anything valuable yourself on your own farm, you will probably be allowed to retain the lot. "Treasure trove," of course, means treasure hidden so long ago that there can be no claimant. If someone else finds the hoard accidentally on your land the law requires you to split fifty-fifty with him.

Before starting an organised treasure hunt on someone else's property, see that a simple legal agreement is drawn up. In the absence of such an agreement, the whole amount will belong to the owner of the property.

The late Lieut.-Colonel H. F. Trew of the South African Police was an authority on the treasure

seeking which followed the South African War. One party after another set out to find the “Kruger millions” and other hoards, and Trew issued the permits. The conditions in those days were that anything discovered had to be handed over to the government, who would pay one-third of the amount to the finder. A policeman accompanied each party. Many farmers had buried their capital when the British troops invaded the Transvaal, and some had died before they could dig it up again. Naturally, the heirs were entitled to many of these hoards. Trew watched the recovery of large amounts of money and jewellery.

Chapter 6

GRAVEYARDS OF THE OCEAN

SOME PEOPLE who once lived along my beach looked upon a shipwreck as a gift from the sea. Perhaps you have heard the old prayer that sums up this attitude: "We pray thee, O Lord, not that wrecks should happen but, should they be the will of God, that thou wilt guide them to these shores for the benefit of the poor inhabitants."

Often on Blaauwberg beach I have found relics of lost ships. My cottage had built into it some timber from a ship that struck the Whale Rock a few miles away. In the dunes I can still point out the bones of dead ships used as fencing posts. And of course everyone knows the ship's figurehead set up in the grounds of an hotel.

South Africa has had more than her share of shipwrecks. Fogs and treacherous currents and above all, human errors of judgment, have caused many disasters. I knew a master mariner so highly skilled as a navigator and with so little superstition in his make-up that when I asked him to explain the latest shipwreck he always made the same reply: "The captain must have been drunk."

I also knew an old coasting skipper who had owned several tiny steamers and had come through all the fogs and other ordeals of the desert coast of South West Africa without even touching a sand bank. "No, I was never in any danger," he told me. "You see, I kept clear of the coast until the fog lifted. I never took a risk with any ship I owned. Only a fool throws away his money."

Shipwreck is a risk that I accept cheerfully, a ten thousand to one chance. Once I was on the bridge of a ship moving cautiously through fog near Luderitz when the look-out shouted: "Breakers ahead!" Then I realised how quickly a watchful engineer could respond to the signal: "Full astern." The fog lifted, and I saw how close the rocks were. It came as a shock to everyone. A few seconds more on that course, and a broken captain would have been calling: "Get the boats away, mister!"

Yet I can still go to my cabin in all weathers, confident that I shall not lose a moment's sleep. For those on the bridge it is different.

If you study wrecks as I have done, talking to seamen and searching the records for truth, you will discover a pattern of folly and history repeating

itself in one tragedy after another. I am not concerned now with famous disasters, the *Birkenhead* or *Waratah*, for some tales can be told far too often. Forgotten shipwrecks hold more drama for me, and sometimes there are surprises.

Here is the little Hamburg barque *Arago* beating into Table Bay in a strong November south-easter a century ago. Carrying full sail, she makes eight knots tacking across the bay. All hands are waiting for the next order, and the *Arago* heels under the weight of the wind as she closes in rapidly with the long white Blaauwberg shore. No order is given. The ship holds her course too long and drives her keel with great force into the sand. Soon she has nine feet of water in the hold. All hands are saved, but a mystery remains for the court of inquiry to solve. I found it at last; my friend was right. *The captain was drunk.*

This beach of mine saw a more sensational wreck a year after the *Arago* affair. It was the custom in those days to send lifesaving expeditions by ox-wagon along the sandy eastern shore of Table Bay. The wagon carried a life-boat and rocket apparatus. One day a report reached the harbour officials that the Hanoverian brigantine *Oste* had been wrecked

near Blaauwberg. Captain Wilson put out in the port life-boat, but could not locate the wreck. He decided that he had missed her in the haze of sand and spray thrown up by the violent south-easter that was raging, and so another party of rescuers set out by ox-wagon.

They found the *Oste* – not in the breakers, but flung up high and dry in the bushes. It was high tide when she approached the shore, and a great sea had carried the brigantine over the beach and into the dunes. She was a total loss. The lime-burners of Blaauwberg, always hungry for timber, broke up the little ship and threw her planking into the flames.

Ships carrying the mails from England fired their guns when they entered Table Bay in the 'sixties of last century. Gunfire was also the distress signal. Once the citizens hurried down to the waterfront to greet the mail boat and found instead that the full-rigged British ship *Akbar* had run aground at Riet Vlei, near Blaauwberg.

It was a fine January day with only a light south-easter blowing. Everyone on board the *Akbar* was brought off safely. The captain was sober. He told

the court of inquiry that he had been at sea for forty years without an accident. Unfortunately the ship had “missed stays” when he put the helm over to turn away from the beach. She forged ahead and ran aground.

So there was the *Akbar* with her rich cargo from Siam, and her back broken. Thousands of boxes of cassia purgative, thousands of bags of rice. The little paddle-steamer Albatross salvaged some of the cargo. Mr. Charles Collier bought the wreck and twelve thousand bags of rice for six hundred pounds; a gamble he had no reason to regret. When it was all over and the ship broke up in the winter gales, the cottagers of Blaauwberg scoured the beaches and picked up the last remnants of the *Akbar*.

Masters of several vessels lost near Blaauwberg blamed the moonlight and the deceptive, intensely white sands. According to the report of the *Oni* wreck seventy years ago, “ships were lured to their doom”. Of course it is not always easy to estimate distances in the moonlight, even when the captain is sober. But I still cannot understand why the Russian barque *Oni* should have been lost at nine o’clock on a fine February evening.

She had coal on board for the Cape Town gas company. Ship and cargo were sold by auction on the stoep of the Commercial Exchange. Someone bid ten guineas for the ship and one hundred pounds for the cargo, but this was refused. A Mr. Mendelssohn then secured ship and cargo for three hundred pounds. Mr. Mendelssohn could not have been a seafaring man. Ship and cargo, apart from the lumps of coal washed up after north-west gales, are still on the bottom of Table Bay. Mr. Mendelssohn’s men saved only the sails and the long boat, the jolly boat and captain’s gig. I have an idea there was vodka on board that Russian barque.

My faded reports of forgotten shipwrecks include the story of the six men, wrecked in a cutter on uninhabited Dassen Island, who lived on rabbits and penguin eggs for twenty-six days. And the tragedy of the whaling schooner *Hope*, lost near Walvis Bay early last century. The men came through the surf safely only to be massacred by Hottentots. Two wounded survivors made a distress signal and were picked up by a ship next day.

What caused the loss of the French ship *La Louette*? All I have is a notice from the Cape Town Gazette of June 21, 1817, stating that the wreck was to be

sold as she lay stranded near Haut Bay with her cargo of gold and silver specie, silver spoons, jewellery, cases of glass and porcelain. No one ever recovered that treasure.

Two years later damaged cargo from the Portuguese brig *Nossa Senhora D'Guia*, wrecked in Table Bay in a north-west gale, was being offered for sale. It was said that a Mr. MacFarlane, who had sailed in her as surgeon, had owned most of the cargo and had been murdered by the master and officers to enrich themselves. An inquiry cleared them of all suspicion. Not long afterwards the stranded hulk of the *Dorah* was for sale on Paarden Island, with her cargo of bar iron and barrels of Stockholm tar.

Table Bay had to wait for more than two centuries after Van Riebeeck's landing before anything effective was done to protect the shipping. The first jetty was built close to the Castle in the very early days, with trees from the Newlands forest. This was merely for unloading boats, and gave no shelter. The first Table Bay disaster involving a number of ships occurred in the gale of May, 1737, when nine ships were driven ashore, more than two hundred lives lost, and cargo worth £160,000 destroyed. One vessel was carried in on the crest of a mountainous

wave, passed directly over the earlier wrecks, and struck high up on the beach. The mole which gave its name to Mouille Point was started as a result of that gale. Every farmer who came to town was required to dispose of his produce, load his wagon with stones at a quarry, and dump the load on the mole. Thus the mole had reached a length of over three hundred feet when a locust invasion ate the crops and stopped the farmers from coming to town. Work on the mole was abandoned, but the remains can still be seen at low tide.

Plans for a harbour were drawn up soon after the British occupation of the Cape, and shelved. Then came the winter gale of 1831, when six ships and cargo worth £40,000 were lost. The government started a stone pier from the foot of Bree Street, but this work soon stopped owing to lack of money. Anchors and cables were taken out to ships in danger of drifting ashore. Much bravery and many great feats of seamanship were recorded. In the Table Bay boatmen of this period were regarded as the most expert and most daring in the world:

Human courage was no substitute for a solid breakwater. The South African Advertiser opposed the scheme, however, on the ground that more than

four thousand ships had entered Table Bay in a quarter of a century, and only forty-four had been wrecked. "This does not include the slaves lost in the wreck of the Portuguese brig *Pacquet Real*," added the newspaper. "That vessel was old. She went to pieces soon after she struck the ground. The slaves were debilitated by confinement and paralysed by fear. Many sank almost without an effort to save themselves." Harbour engineers talk in millions today, and there is no doubt that millions more will be spent on Table Bay dock schemes. Yet not much more than a century ago one Robert Knox, master mariner, put forward a Table Bay harbour scheme estimated to cost £32,000 if convict labour was employed. Engineers scoffed at Captain Knox. One of them declared: "It does not appear to be practicable by any expense to render Table Bay secure and sheltered, nor to construct any kind of dock or harbour for the reception of large ships, and scarcely even of small craft." Another engineer reported: "Table Bay is faulty in every point that constitutes a proper place for the resort of shipping."

So the losses went on, and in the year 1840 so many ships were wrecked that a public meeting was held

to discuss the problem. The ship *Paragon*, the barque *Howard*, the French ship *La Cygne*, the brig *Palmer* all went down. Then the barque *Bengal* broke up near Blaauwberg, so that my beach was strewn with saltpetre and barks of redwood. Next victim was the barque *Catherine Jameson*, which ran aground near Mouille Point at night and became a total loss with her cargo of coffee beans. Finally the brig *Udney Castle*, loaded with coal, went down near the Green Point lighthouse.

A dramatic wreck two years later was that of the convict ship *Waterloo*, bound from England to Van Diemen's Land. She went aground at the Salt River mouth, and within half an hour she was a mass of splintered timber. No lifeboats were carried, but a number of survivors reached the shore with the aid of driftwood. Four women, fourteen children, fourteen sailors and one hundred and forty-three convicts were drowned. Malay boatmen showed great courage that night. A number of horsemen rode into the surf like Woltemade and saved many lives. And the citizens of Cape Town held a meeting and opened a subscription list for a lifeboat.

Cape Town had four jetties in the middle of last

century, but not one of them gave shelter to large vessels in the winter gales. Near the Castle there was the old South jetty, then the new South Jetty, the Central jetty at the foot of Heerengracht and the North Wharf at the end of Bree Street.

Table Bay's greatest hero at that time was Captain Robert Granger of Granger's Bay, near the New Somerset Hospital. He was a ship-owner, merchant and whaler man, trading with ports as far away as New York, and handling his own craft with a skill equal to that of any man in his employ. Granger's whale boats went to the rescue of shipwrecked crews again and again.

Captain Granger lived at Mouille Point and watched the sea with eyes that never missed a significant detail. It was blowing hard, almost at gale force, from the south-west one February evening in 1857 when he saw the thirty-ton schooner *Miner* putting out for Hondeklip Bay. She was loaded with stores for the Namaqualand copper mines; possibly she was too heavily loaded. Rain and hail were lashing Captain Granger's window panes, and the lightning was fierce. As the schooner came abreast of Granger's home a heavy squall struck her and laid her over on her beam-ends. The little *Miner* never

recovered from that blow. She lay there helpless with her company clinging desperately to the weather bulwarks.

Within a few minutes Granger was pulling out alone in a dinghy to the wreck. He had sent a message to another boat owner asking for help; but before help arrived, Granger had saved a woman passenger and four men. The second boat picked up the remaining seven seamen. Then the *Miner* sank.

Fishermen buoyed the wreck soon afterwards when their lines became entangled with the rigging. The underwriters then put her up for auction as she lay on the sea-floor, and she was knocked down to Mr. Henry Adams, owner of other small craft, for five pounds. One clear day Adams saw her below the surface, heeling slightly, with all sail set just as she had gone down. They passed a rope under the bows, but salvage proved to be impossible.

Captain Granger carried out another rescue in March that year. The British full-rigged ship *Defence* had entered Table Bay with the mate in charge, the captain having been put under restraint when he became "deranged through religious excitement". The mate should have waited for

daylight. He was not familiar with the lights, and he sailed the ship on to Woodstock beach. Granger saved the crew, but nothing could save the ship. The people of Cape Town presented Captain Granger with a miniature silver lighthouse for the first rescue. Governor Sir George Grey pinned a gold medal on Granger's breast for the second effort. But those were merely two episodes in a long career of bravery.

Many an old-time master in sail took his calling so seriously that he preferred death to survival after losing his ship. When the barque *Mariner* struck at Green Point while beating out of Table Bay a century ago, the master saw all his passengers and crew into the boats. Then he shot himself.

A strange incident occurred not long afterwards, when the barque *Bernicia* ran on the rocks off Robben Island. Some of the seamen were saved from drowning by lepers. Then cases of liquor and hogsheads of rum drifted on shore. It was a wild June night. Lepers and seamen broached the liquor and started a drunken orgy. Several of the men who had escaped from the wreck, and several of their rescuers, were washed off the rocks and drowned.

Probably the most disastrous gale that ever raged in the southern hemisphere was the Table Bay gale of May 17, 1865 – the historic “great gale” in which eighteen ships; were lost. Mercifully the death roll was low, for only sixty souls perished during that night of terror. This included two ships which went down with all hands; the barque *City of Peterborough* and the Union Line mail steamer *Athens*. It is the cylinder head of the *Athens* (not *City of Athens*, please) which you can still see beyond the rocks at Mouille Point. I have before me the report of the gale published in the Cape Argus next day. The value of the lost ships and their cargoes was estimated at £100,000 – no mean guess, for the actual figure arrived at later was £120,000.

“It is with a sad heart that we sit down to describe the tragic catastrophe of yesterday while the dead bodies of those whom twenty-four hours ago we reckoned among our fastest friends are still drifting among the tangled seaweed or tossed in cruel sport by the hungry, crawling foam,” wrote the Cape Argus reporter. “Such a scene, or rather succession of wild and terrible scenes, as were presented



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yesterday were never witnessed in Cape Town before. First of all there was the sinking of the anchor boat *Stag* while engaged on an errand of mercy. Table Bay boatmen have long been distinguished for their courage in the hour of highest danger. But of all these brave fellows the crew of the *Stag* tanked among the first – Jack Collins, Joe Myers, Frank Maker and Nicholas. They have all gone, men as gallant and undaunted as any whoever stormed a breach or won the Victoria Cross.

“Then came one vessel after another in succession, drifting away to destruction on the rocks and sands beyond the Castle. Happily no lives were lost until the ill-fated barque *City of Peterborough* struck upon the reef at Papendorp. Within half an hour she went to pieces, her helpless crew and passengers still clinging in suspense to the fragments of the wreck. The rocket apparatus was used, and at each shot the cries of the captain’s wife and children and those of the crew could be heard in wild shrieks of mingled despair and hope ... in vain.”

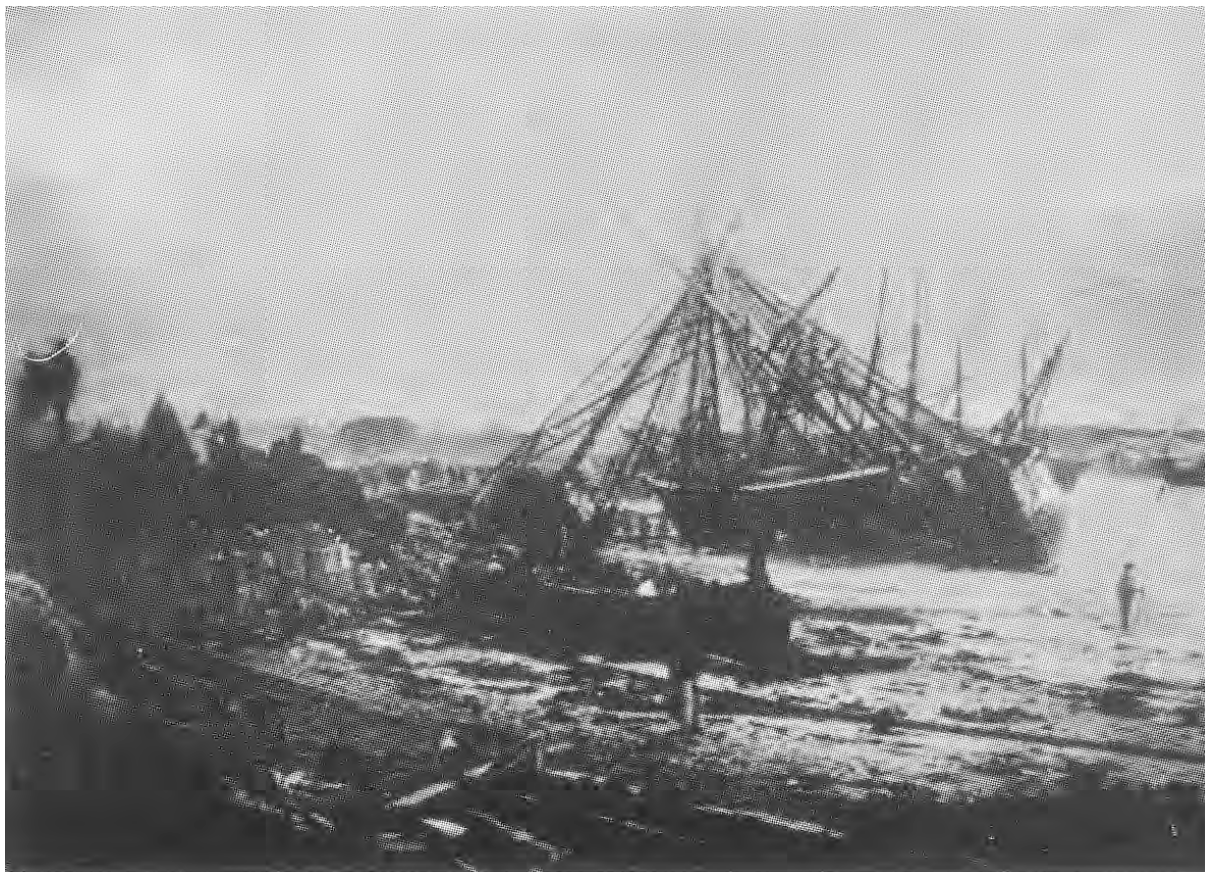
When I first knew the Table Bay waterfront I met old men who recalled that scene as a burning and ineradicable memory of their youth. As the sun

went down they saw the *Athens* signalling that her last anchor cable had parted. They watched her struggling out to sea, but with power too feeble to conquer the force of the gale. She drifted broadside on to the rocks. Then night fell, and the darkness was more frightful than the day.

Always there were men willing to gamble on the chances of refloating a wreck or salving the cargo. After the gale of 1865, however, the prices were low. One ship fetched £20 at auction, another £82, a third £141, and only a few passed the £1,000 mark.

They were building the Table Bay breakwater at the time of the great gale, but it was not far enough advanced to prevent the disaster. Even when it was finished the anchorage was not entirely safe, though losses diminished. A July gale in 1878 was recorded as more severe than the 1865 horror; but of thirteen vessels in the bay, only four were lost and only five seamen drowned.

The new breakwater which saved so many ships proved fatal to the British barque *Shepherd*. This was a strange accident indeed, due entirely to carelessness. She had come in from the ocean and should have anchored while awaiting the pilot.



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Instead, she was allowed to drift. The heavy swell lifted her on to the breakwater, broadside on, and the concrete split her open from end to end. Flung on to the rocks by the backwash, she hung there just long enough for all hands to launch the boats and get clear. Then she vanished.

Not often do you find a ship running aground in the same place twice, and escaping on both occasions, but that was what happened to the British four-masted barque *Sierra Pedrosa* of sixteen hundred tons. She sailed into Table Bay from Cardiff with a cargo of coal in the winter of 1889 and anchored in the bay. Soon afterwards she parted her cables in a gale and grounded on the Paarden Island beach. She was salvaged and repaired. Thirteen years later she came again (having been renamed *Brutus*) and an August storm drove her on to the beach close to the scene of the previous accident. In the same gale the steamer *City of Lincoln* ran ashore not far from the *Brutus*, and her iron keel is still to be seen there.

The *Brutus* was heavily battered in an exposed position, but she was strongly built of steel, and she resisted all the blows of the sea. Tugs hauled her off when the weather moderated. She floated. At an auction sale the old ship fetched £345. I remember

her as a familiar sight in Table Bay for many years, and when she was a coal hulk I often rowed out to her. She also served as a week-end training ship for sea cadets. Finally she was towed to South Georgia on the fringe of the Antarctic. I believe she is still to be seen at Prinz Olaf harbour, where she served as a coal hulk for the whalers.

It was the *Brutus* hulk that was selected as a hiding place by an absconding bank cashier. No passports were required in those days. He remained quietly on board the hulk with his ill-gotten money until the hue and cry had died down, and then took passage for some far country. Long afterwards he wrote to a friend describing his escape.

Another hulk which formed part of the Table Bay panorama for years was used as a dynamite store. It was safe enough there until the hulk broke away from her moorings one night and drifted on to Woodstock beach. They stacked thousands of boxes of dynamite on the beach during the salvage operations; enough to have shattered Woodstock and broken most of Cape Town's windows. Then the hulk was refloated and the dynamite loaded on board. Harbour officials breathed again.



The Brutus was heavily battered in an exposed position, but she was strongly built of steel and she resisted all the blows of the sea.

Hulks and wrecks were considered blots on the seascape when the Cape Town pageant of 1910 was being planned. The hulks were moved out of the way, leaving the wrecks in the “Bay of Wrecks” to be destroyed. It took a lot of dynamite. One or two wrecks were allowed to remain, as it was felt that they would become dangers to navigation if only the parts showing above the surface were blown up. Thus you can still see the bows of the steamer *Amerika* which was scuttled when her blazing cargo of coal defeated the fire brigade at the docks.

Closer inshore, at low tide, you can just discern the *Ryvingen*, She was also a coal-carrier, and she anchored in Table Bay a few weeks after the *Amerika* fire. During a north-west gale she sent up distress rockets and drifted towards the sunken *Amerika* before the rescue tug could save her. A huge sea lifted the *Ryvingen* and drove her bows into the side of the *Amerika*. All hands were thrown to the deck by the concussion. They were saved, but the *Ryvingen* became a total loss.

Wherever you go along the South African coast you find the wrecks and legends of wrecks. Some were landmarks for years, known to everyone who

passed that way: others were so remote that only the most inquisitive beachcombers found them.

Two little-known Cape Peninsula wrecks are the *Kakapo* and the *Clan Monroe*, both lost near Kommetjie early this century. You can still find the bones of the *Kakapo* in the sands of lonely Chapman’s Bay beach, with the boiler almost complete and the rudder jutting above the dunes. It seems that at night the master identified Chapman’s Peak as Cape Point, and turned inshore with the inevitable result. Two seamen reached the shore in the early hours of the morning with a lantern, and wandered about in the veld until they saw lights in the milking shed on Brakkloof farm. All the men remaining on the wreck were soon rescued.

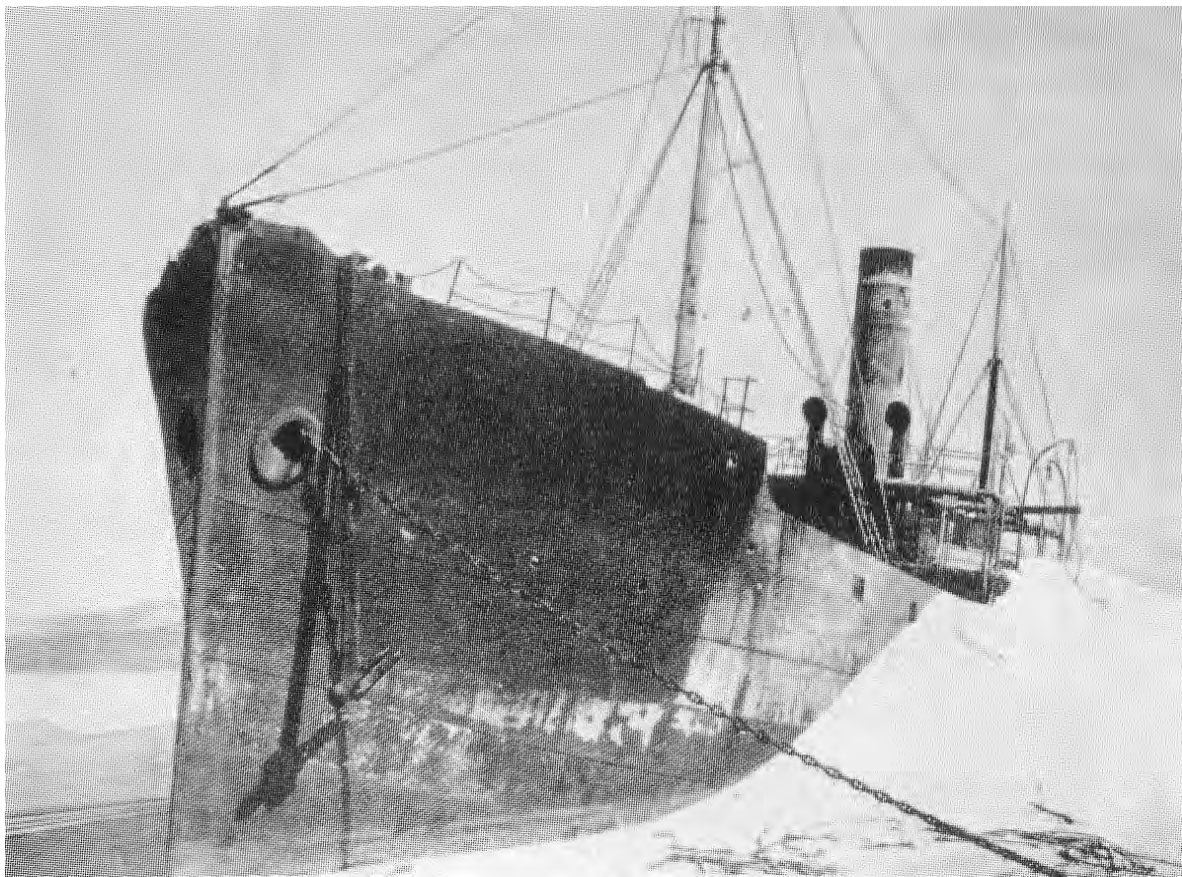
Slangkop Point at Kommetjie saw the end of the *Clan Monroe* in heavy weather at night. She was a five thousand ton turret steamer loaded with dynamite and gun-cotton; and with high seas running, Captain Brown must have wondered whether anyone on board would live to see the dawn. The ship’s back was broken. He had white officers and a lascar crew. Nitro-glycerine exuded by wet dynamite is liable to explode if rubbed.



**Wherever you go along the South African coast
you will find the wrecks and legends of wrecks.**

Captain Brown kept his head. He fired rockets until daybreak, then hoisted distress signals. Lifebuoys with messages attached were thrown over the side. The decks were swept by every sea, but Captain Brown decided to take the risk of sending a boat to the shore with a line. All hands showed great courage. The second, third and fourth officers, an apprentice and the chief steward manned the lifeboat. They put up a great fight in the heavy sea, and even when the boat capsized near the beach they hung on to the line and reached the shore safely. The line was hauled taut, and it looked as though the life-saving apparatus could be brought into action. Unhappily the line had chafed on the rocks and very soon it parted.

Meanwhile the distress signals had been reported, and men of the Royal Garrison Artillery were dragging the rocket apparatus through the sand from Kalk Bay station down the Fish Hoek Valley. Two shots fell short. The third rocket crossed the wreck, and one by one the men were landed. The chief officer killed the sheep on board before leaving, so that they would not suffer when the ship broke up. He carried the captain's terrier in his arms.



You can still find the bones of the Kakapo in the sands of lonely Chapman's Bay each.

Last of all came Captain Brown. He hauled down the distress signals before leaving. Eighty-two men had left the wreck and reached the shore without the loss of a single life. Seventeen days later, in calm weather, some of the explosives were salvaged. When the ship went down at last the beaches near Kommetjie were strewn with casks of whisky and cases of tinned foods and other merchandise. Not all of this cargo was ruined by salt water. Not all of it was found by the Customs.

A condenser from the *Clan Monroe* remains near the scene of the wreck. Only a few miles from the *Clan Monroe* wreck, across the peninsula off Glencairn, the submerged hull of the *Clan Stuart* lies in False Bay. She was the *Clan Monroe*'s sister ship, blown on shore in a violent south-easter early in World War I. For many years she remained above the surface, linked with the beach by cableway.

Cape Agulhas, one of the great turning points of the oceans, ranks next to Table Bay as a graveyard of the sea. Off this cape, and in Struys Bay to the east of the cape, rest ships of all the centuries from the time of the Portuguese; and possibly much earlier ships. But only one of these lost ships is

remembered in such a peculiar way as the American sailing ship *Gentoo*. She went down in Struys Bay over a century ago. Among the survivors were a number of young servant-girls who had been engaged by wealthy people in the Cape Town suburbs. The girls soon drifted out of respectable employment into New Street (now Queen Victoria Street) and Keerom Street, which had bad reputations. They set up places which became known as "Gentoo houses", with Malay

orchestras to provide dance music. To this day a loose girl is called a "Gentoo" by the Cape Malays.

It was in Struys Bay in March, 1871, that the fast passenger steamer *Queen of the Thames* came to grief. The captain made the lame excuse that he had mistaken a bush fire for the Agulhas light; but the weather was perfect and a careful navigator could not have lost his ship that night.

This was the maiden voyage of a ship described at the time as the finest steamer ever launched on the Clyde. She had two hundred passengers, and most of them were at a concert in the saloon when the ship struck a reef. Everyone remained on board that night; all the passengers landed safely next day, but

four members of the crew were drowned in the surf.

When a salvage party boarded the *Queen of the Thames* two days later they were surprised to hear a piano being played in the saloon. The musician turned out to be a stowaway from Melbourne whose presence had never been suspected during the voyage. He had remained on board (possibly hoping for loot) after the ship had been abandoned.

Farmers camped in their wagons on the coast, gazing at the doomed liner with her sails still set. A large marquee tent was pitched close by, furnished with carpets, mirrors and sideboards from the ship. Speculators bought the wreck for fifteen thousand pounds and stripped her of everything that could be sold, making a handsome profit before she broke up. Many a souvenir of the *Queen of the Thames* is to be found in the district, and pieces of her silver plate have become heirlooms.

Among the passengers in the *Queen of the Thames* was a Dr. Ozanne, his wife and their eight children, the youngest a baby in arms. Dr. Ozanne had been the hero of a plague epidemic in Tasmania, but now he was dying of tuberculosis, and hurrying back to his home in Guernsey before the end came. He

travelled to Bredasdorp with the rest of the passengers, having lost all his possessions. His wife said afterwards that she had watched the seamen looting her trunks; but she was happy because the children, her real jewels, were saved.

Carved woodwork with scrolls and foliation, a coat of arms and crest, was found on a beach east of Agulhas some years ago. No one in the area, however, could remember a wreck which might have given up this fragment. A yachtsman set himself the task of solving the secret. Before long a Liverpool reference library placed him in touch with the Bates family, owners of the crest. The firm of Sir Edward Bates and Sons had taken part in the trade to India. Their records showed that a large sailing ship named the *Bates Family* had been dismasted off the Cape of Good Hope at the end of last century, and abandoned in a sinking condition. Her crew had been picked up. This carving from her poop had drifted round the southern tip of Africa and found its way to the lonely beach.

Herold's Bay, about half-way between Mossel Bay and Knysna, is the resting place of South Africa's strangest wreck. It is not a ship, but a floating dock; the first of its kind ever seen in South African



Some wrecks became landmarks for years, known to everyone who passed that way; others were so remote that only the most inquisitive beachcombers found them.

waters. Ordered by the Natal Government, the dock was intended for Durban harbour. It was nearly four hundred feet long, and designed to lift ships up to four thousand five hundred tons. Captain John Macmillan was in command of the steamer *Baralong* which towed the dock; the same *Baralong* which became famous as a “mystery ship” in World War I. The long tow started in September, 1902, and Captain Macmillan passed Cape Point fifty days later. Then a gale blew up from the south-west. Captain Gow and his sixteen men on board the dock wondered whether the towing hawsers would hold.

They did not. First the starboard bridle parted, then the port. The dock drifted so close inshore that the *Baralong* could not save her. But as the enormous dock neared the shore it was picked up by a mighty sea, lifted over a reef, and left close to the beach impaled on a pinnacle rock. All the crew escaped. The *Baralong*, the cruiser *Monarch* and the tug *T. E. Fuller* tried for weeks to refloat the dock, but in vain. She still lies high up on lonely Glentana Beach, with one side torn away, rusty and twisted after more than half a century of battering by the sea.

I love the sea, but never can I forget its changing moods. It washes my feet as I saunter along the beaches, and its sound is infinitely soothing. Yet that same creature can raise its voice to a menacing roar, and smash the largest ship in the world and all on board ... and wash the blood off the sand so that not a drop remains.

Chapter 7

SOUTHERN LIGHTS

*“Sail on!” it says, “sail on, ye stately ship!
And with your floating bridge the ocean span;
Be mine to guard this light from all eclipse,
Be yours to bring man nearer unto man!”*

Longfellow.

LONG AFTER I had sold the cottage that was too close to the sea I bought a house that was too close to a lighthouse. It was the Green Point lighthouse, the first ever built in South Africa, and the idea of the beam flashing over my front wall appealed to me. I admired the tower most of all when it stood out as a black silhouette against an orange sunset.

All the ships entering Table Bay were framed in my doorway. Ships known and unknown; some of them so familiar that I could imagine the routine; ships passing so close that I could hear and feel the beat of their engines. As I stood at my window I could almost distinguish the cottage I had sold on the far side of the bay.

It was a pleasant house, apart from the foghorn at the lighthouse. In time I could sleep through the blast, but never did I become completely unaware

of it. I should have found consolation in the fact that three hundred hours of fog (and the foghorn) a year are about the Table Bay maximum; but I was not surprised to hear that the lighthouse-keepers and their families hate it as much as the people of Green Point and Mouille Point.

Life in a lighthouse is fine without a foghorn. Such a lighthouse as Sam Weller had in mind when he remarked: “Anythin’ for a quiet life, as the man said when he took the sitivation at the lighthouse.” I often thought that I would like to own a lighthouse, and I believe eccentrics in other countries have succeeded in buying disused lighthouses and converting them into dwellings.

One man built up the modern lighthouse service along the South African coast – Mr. Harry Claude Cooper, a short, lean, vigorous man with humorous eyes and a good-humoured, furrowed face. I used to call on him in a tiny office with a wide view over Table Bay Docks; a man who loved his work and knew how to make others feel the spell of it.

Cooper learnt his craft from the greatest lighthouse engineer in the world, William Douglass of Eddystone fame. Cooper was only twenty years old

when Douglass sent him all the way to Australia to take charge of the construction of a lighthouse on Cape Byron, New South Wales. It still stands. Cooper knew his job before his twenty-first birthday. As a result of this early success Cooper secured the post of Cape lighthouse engineer, and in 1902 he arrived in Cape Town.

He found only one fog signal along the whole coast, the old Robben Island gun. There were seventeen lights of all types, but the most powerful was of one hundred thousand candlepower. (Compare this strength with the nineteen million candlepower light now in use at Cape Point.) Cooper trebled the South African coast lights during his forty years' work, and set up many fog signals and radio beacons. When he retired he told me: "It is my honest opinion that South Africa has done more in the cause of safe navigation than any other country in the world."

Harry Cooper spent half his time every year visiting his lighthouses. He toiled through the sand in Cape carts and ox-wagons, and rode out gales in fishing boats. Once, when he was at Agulhas, the Port Elizabeth light failed. He tried to intercept a passing mail boat in a small open boat; but he failed to

reach her and spent a miserable night at sea. Cooper also liked to recall a passage he made in a coaster from Port St. Johns to East London years ago, sharing the only cabin with the Chinese cook and a magistrate's wife!

You may wonder whether the lighthouse-keepers and their families are able to live side by side in remote places without quarrelling. Well, they are only human. Mr. Cooper once told me that the problems of lighthouse design he had to solve were simple in comparison with the family feuds he had settled. It was fairly easy to engage the right men, the type with what he called a "lighthouse complex"; but it was impossible for him to select their wives and families!

However, nearly all of them were happy. One old hand told Cooper that if he won a large sweepstake prize he would buy a lighthouse of his own and turn on the light when he felt like it. Cooper always liked to see the sons of lighthouse-keepers entering his little service, for they knew exactly what to expect.

Old sailor men manned practically every lighthouse in South Africa early this century. They were

accustomed to isolation; they could paint a lighthouse tower without feeling dizzy; and they knew how to clean the lamps and lenses. Nowadays, however, the keeper is more of a mechanic. Oil-burning wick lamps consuming twelve gallons of oil a night have vanished. Vaporised paraffin burners with incandescent mantles are obsolete. Small automatic lights work unattended for a year at a stretch on acetylene, lighting up at sunset by means of an ingenious valve operated by the heat of the sun, and going out at sunrise.

Powerful lights now depend on electricity, and in remote places the keepers must know how to run large generating plants and fog diaphones. They are radio operators and flag and lamp signalmen, too, and every keeper in the service must take regular weather observations. Some of the old routine lingers. Anyone who imagines that a lighthouse provides a career for a lazy man should try putting a brilliant polish on a lens weighing six tons.

Cooper built a number of lighthouses, but he always regarded the present Cape Point light as his greatest achievement. Experts had reported that the ideal site was inaccessible owing to precipices, and for that

reason it could not be considered. Cooper decided that it could be done. The old light, you may remember, shone from a dramatic position more than eight hundred feet above high water mark. It could be seen thirty-six miles away in clear weather, but it was eclipsed by clouds for about nine hundred hours a year.

So the bold plan drawn up by Cooper was accepted shortly before World War I, and the foundation of the new light was laid on Vasco da Gama Peak about three hundred feet above the sea. Cooper made a road through the rocks, laid a trolley track, lowered a trolley over the cliff and sent down building materials by crane. He quarried stone from the cliff and transported it by trolley to the site. Finally a pipeline a mile long was laid to carry oil for the lamps. (Electricity came to the Cape Point light twenty years later.) Within two years the new light was shining out from the ultimate projecting spur of the Table Mountain range.

Cape Columbine, north of Saldanha, was Cooper's last important construction job. This is what they call in the service a "making" light for ships closing in with the coast after crossing the ocean; a light that ranks with the Lizard and Fastnet Rock, Cape

Race and Navesink.

No one with a sense of drama can toil up the winding staircase of a lighthouse without thinking of the queer situations which might occur within those solid walls. *“Keep the light burning bright and clear from sunset to sunrise.”* That is the first rule of the service, the commandment every keeper obeys. And there is more in it nowadays than putting a match to it. Perhaps you read that classic short story by John Russell called “The Wicks of Macassar”, in which a crazy, lonely keeper used the pigtails of the thieves who attacked him to keep his lamps going. There are less fantastic tales of the South African lighthouse service which are true tales of bravery and resource. Sometimes the wives have carried on the routine while their husbands have been out rescuing seamen in danger. More often it is a matter of mechanical ingenuity.

John Allen, a famous Cape Point keeper, had a difficult problem to solve when he found a mantle of the wrong size had been supplied. It meant that the automatic flashing apparatus could not be used. However, he rigged up a six hundred candlepower electric light with a hand switch. Each keeper in turn sat with a stop watch before him, switching on

for two seconds, off for eight seconds. They had to remain at their weary task for three nights until the correct mantle reached them. Try it for only half an hour and you will understand the strain involved.

When the Cape St. Francis light was struck by lightning the lamps were shattered and the apparatus burnt out. Nevertheless, the men set to work and improvised a light that was kept going until daybreak: At another South African lighthouse the engine operating the half-ton fog bell failed, so the keeper tied a rope to the clapper and struck the bell at the right intervals for nine hours. That meant hundreds of heavy strokes.

A ship rolled over and sank close to the Bluff lighthouse at Durban some years ago. They had to blast the sunken hull out of the harbour mouth, and the explosions upset the mercury bath in the lighthouse. For several nights the keepers were forced to turn the lens mechanism by hand so that outwardly there would be no change in the flash. In a gale of wind, of course, the keeper must be ready to replace broken glass with “storm panes” to protect the sacred lamp. A keeper at a Zululand light remained at his post when it seemed possible that the tower would collapse during an earthquake.

However, the risks encountered during the day's work do not spoil the lighthouse man's sleep. It is the return to the city after a long spell in isolation which may be dangerous. One man confessed that the traffic frightened him so much that he was unwilling to cross the street alone.

Lighthouse-keepers are keen observers of wild life. Dr. Peringuey of the South African Museum once conducted a party of visiting naturalists to Cape Point; and he asked that old character Bennett whether he would be prepared to keep records of migratory birds and other details. "What's the pay?" asked Bennett bluntly. Peringuey explained that no money was available, but that a man who was interested in birds might aid scientific knowledge. "No, I don't take no interest in birds," replied Bennett immediately.

This was not strictly correct, as Bennett proved when a pair of Verreaux's eagles nested on the cliff near the lighthouse and preyed not only on klipspringers and dassies, but also on fowls. Bennett noticed that white fowls remained immune during these raids, as the eagles seemed to have an instinctive fear of anything white. Thereafter he bred white fowls only.

Another famous bird story in the lighthouse service goes back to the days before wireless when a pigeon post was organised between Green Point and Dassen Island. Four pigeons were supplied to each lighthouse for breeding purposes; but no eggs appeared. The expert who was called in discovered that all the cocks were at Green Point and all the hens were on the island.

Lighthouse men (and some of their wives) are great anglers. John Allen of Cape Point was among the first men in South Africa to identify the tunny. Often he saw the sea running white and wild as the albacore shoals passed. Then he would hurry down the cliff to catch two dozen albacore within a few hours. He knew the ways of all the fish species from sardines to sharks, and made his finest hauls just after the spring tides. Allen had a cave for wet days; a sea cave where he could remain dry while he fished from the entrance. He hated the south-east gales which spoil his fishing and howled round the lighthouse, not for days on end but for weeks. Cape Point is the windiest spot in Southern Africa. Records show that it can be calm in Simonstown while the wind screams over Cape Point.

Fishing is still the great hobby of the lighthouse

service, but these people of the lonely places have other ways of passing the time. Those who miss the city pavements are weeded out within a few months. The men and women who find no hardship in isolation are usually lovers of nature; beachcombers and gardeners, owners of cows and pigs, lovers of pets, people who would rather walk or swim than go to a cinema. Always there are the seabirds. Round the island lights are tortoises and rabbits, descendants of animals brought from the mainland long ago. Painters and writers are to be found in lighthouse towers. One keeper paints on *perlemoen* shells as well as canvas, and mounts his works of art on imbuia stands. Every keeper is something of an historian, for stories have gathered round every light, with old muzzleloading cannon, old fragments of ships, and sometimes old figure-heads to bring the past to life.

Lighthouse-keepers seem to be a healthy lot. I remember meeting a Mr. Robert Holmes at the Green Point lighthouse some years ago, an old Royal Navy signalman who wore the ribbon of the Egyptian medal for his part in bombarding Alexandria in the 'eighties of last century. When he joined the Cape lighthouse service and was posted

to Danger Point he had to travel by ox-wagon from Bat River to Hermanus and then take a fishing boat to Gansbaai. Often in danger, and sometimes earning rewards for bravery, Robert Holmes drew his pension for thirty-two years and died aged ninety-two.

Centuries ago slaves were sent to keep a bonfire going on an iron platform near the site of the present Green Point light when a Dutch East India Company's ship made its landfall in the evening. A similar warning on Robben Island sometimes enabled the captains to secure cross-bearings. It was better than nothing, but the cautious mariner preferred to haul off for the night in spite of the delay.

Many fine sailing ships were lost in Table Bay early last century, as you have heard. The toll in lives and property was heavy, imported goods were expensive. It was not until the time of Sir Rufane Donkin, however, that the risk of shipwreck was reduced when the solid lighthouse arose at Green Point. (Herman Schutte was the architect, a grand craftsman; but he was treated shabbily over a bill for £449 which he submitted after designing the lighthouse, and landed in the Bankruptcy Court.)

The fine lighthouse building stands almost unchanged after more than one hundred and thirty years. Donkin would probably have built a Table Bay breakwater and harbour at the same period if only he had remained in office.

Old records show that the Green Point light was not used every night during the early years. Apparently it was considered dangerous to attract seamen inshore during north-west gales or strong south-easters; so the lamp remained unlit. And on moonlight nights the lighthouse was kept in darkness for reasons of economy! Such ideas persisted for a long time. Mr. John X. Merriman was so violently opposed to construction that he declared: "Lighthouses are a danger to ships – they are drawn in like moths round a candle, and then they are wrecked."

Mouille Point lighthouse can now be traced only by its foundations near the New Somerset Hospital. So much confusion exists regarding this light that I may as well give you its story. It was a pyramid when first set up in 1842, but about twenty years later this was replaced by a squat, cylindrical tower. (Mr. C. W. Solomon, who lives within two hundred yards of the spot, once showed me a painting of it.)

A red light was displayed, visible ten miles away; but in 1908 the Mouille Point light was put out and replaced by a more prominent automatic light on the breakwater. The tower at Mouille Point survived for some years as a workshop. When it was demolished at last, members of the public began referring to the Green Point light as the Mouille Point light. This habit, erroneous but harmless, has never died out. Lighthouse men find it annoying.

Cape Agulhas light, built a few years before Mouille Point, came as a result of a public meeting in Cape Town organised by shipping men and consuls. Among the speakers was Mr. van Breda, who owned the farm Zoetendal's Vlei running down to this southern tip of Africa. Mr. van Breda had seen many wrecks; and he moved the gathering with his pitiful experiences when the broken corpses of men, women and children were washed ashore. No wonder every old lighthouse has its ghosts. Zoetendal's Vlei, incidentally, was named after the first Agulhas wreck, the Dutch East India ship Zoetendal, lost there nearly three centuries ago. She was the first of a tragic procession. Few capes in the world can have seen more disasters and deaths than this pleasant headland, this great turning

point regarded by geographers as the meeting-place of the Atlantic and the Indian Oceans.

Joanna with specie from Bengal was a treasure ship that sank off Agulhas. Her crew saved some of the gold coin, but much of it still lies beneath the waves. *Nossa Senhora de los Milagros*, homeward bound to Lisbon from Siam, was another richly-laden ship lost on those rocks; but they brought a huge fortune in oriental diamonds on shore, leaving next to nothing for modern divers. Here, too, are the rotting timbers of the *Saxemburgh* with her cargo of rice. Seven of her company reached the shore and eighty were drowned. Here are the French ship *Centaur*, the *Mentor* which went down with all hands except two who clung to a hatch combing, the *Nicobar* of Denmark and the *Duke of Northumberland*.

When the barque *Doncaster* struck she was carrying troops from Mauritius to England. She broke up at once and not a soul lived to tell the tale. Bodies drifted ashore, but not a scrap of driftwood bearing the name of the ship. Long afterwards it became apparent that the lost ship was the *Doncaster*. St. Mungo Point, half a mile from the Agulhas light, reminds us of the barque *St. Mungo*. Nearby the

French ship *La Lisle* went down.

This is the cape of dead ships, the cape of sunken treasure. Here treacherous eddies set inshore. Here the trooper *Arniston* stranded early last century as I have described; and when Van Breda went by chance to the beach a week later he found the vultures feeding on hundreds of bodies among the rocks. Anchors and chain from the *Arniston* appear and re-appear in the sand near the fishing village named after the ship.

No wonder Bredasdorp has incorporated the Agulhas lighthouse in its municipal coat-of-arms. Records of the village show that a century ago farmers in the district were selling a pure oil, made from the tails of Cape sheep, at ten shillings a gallon for use in the Agulhas lamps.

Dassen Island has a cast-iron lighthouse eighty feet high. The tower, apart from the foundation of masonry, was made at the Chance works near Birmingham, shipped in parts and bolted together on the island.

Long ago I asked a veteran among the lighthouse men to describe the most tragic scene he had known during his years in the service. Without hesitation



The cast-iron lighthouse tower was made in Birmingham, shipped in parts, and bolted together on Dassen Island.

he replied: "That night in 1902 at Port Elizabeth – the night of the gale." He told me his story, and I confirmed every detail afterwards in the official records.

Algoa Bay, I found, had known five great gales. It had a bad reputation for shipwrecks before the docks were built; though never were there such losses as Table Bay knew in northwest gales before the breakwater protected shipping. Southeasters caused much havoc by driving ships ashore at Port Elizabeth, whereas in Table Bay the south-easter merely blew ships out to sea.

When a gale was expected at Port Elizabeth it was the custom for the port captain to hoist a signal reading: "Strike lower yards and topmasts." Thus, by lessening the resistance to the wind aloft, a shipmaster might hope to ride out the gale in safety. Some did. Old newspapers, old reports of inquiries describe the crews struggling to lay out anchors; the cables parting, sailing ships beating out of the bay, clawing off the lee shore; or losing their canvas and drifting on to the beach. Sometimes the port life-boat and whale-boats were used to take off ships' companies. Many lives were saved by rocket

apparatus.

Years of disaster in Algoa Bay were 1859, 1869, 1872, 1888 and 1902. And the gale of 1902 was the most furious of all. I have heard the tale, studied the photographs, and it is clear to me why the scene should have made such a deep impression on the lighthouse-keepers. Their powerful oil lamp threw its revolving beam from the Donkin reserve over the bay like a searchlight. Ships fighting for their lives were revealed with each swing of the lens. On the morning of Sunday, August 31, 1902, the men in the lighthouse had counted thirty-eight ships riding at anchor. That night the beam shone on ship after ship going to her doom.

It was a hurricane, not a gale. Heavy rain fell during the day, the black south-easter rose in the evening and by midnight (as the lighthouse-keeper recalled) "it was as though ten thousand devils had been let loose". Soon after midnight the first distress signals were observed. One ship burnt tar barrels. Rockets soared up. Two passenger liners, ablaze with lights, were able to ease the strain on their anchor-chains by steaming slowly ahead. But the sailing ships had to take their chance. Before daybreak five of them had dragged their anchors and drifted into the surf.

Soon after daybreak other ships joined the chaotic panorama of North End beach; a small armada swept by the sea from end to end; men, women and children huddled on the poops or lashed to the rigging. Seven men and one woman clung to the bowsprit of their wrecked barque. The crowd on the beach saw one man slip down a rope into the sea. He struck out bravely for the shore, but the next breaker overwhelmed him. Soon afterwards the ship broke in two, and when a great sea passed there were no more human beings on the bowsprit. Another wreck was linked to the shore by a rocket line, but the men were so tired that they were unable to haul the life-saving gear on board. Nineteen ships were lost in that hurricane, and scores of lives. More than half a century later the timbers of some of those ships may still be seen embedded in the sand of North End beach.

Cape Receife lighthouse, a black tower with white bands seven miles from Port Elizabeth, is often cut off from the mainland by the sea in heavy weather. This is one more light established as a result of many shipwrecks. Rocks and reefs below such lighthouses have been named after vessels that have been lost there. And so it was with Thunderbolt

Reef.

Thunderbolt Reef is shown up clearly at night by the blood red sector of the Receife light. But there was no warning of any kind in 1847 when H.M.S. Thunderbolt passed that way. She was an historic ship, the first man-o'-war on the Cape station to be driven by steam. This thousand-ton ship had paddle-boxes and a tall funnel. Her loss, is a mystery to this day, for she ran on to the reef in calm, clear weather. Her captain, Commander Alexander Boyle, R.N., succeeded in refloating her and beaching her on the sands of Algoa Bay; but she broke her back and Boyle was dismissed from the service.

Mr. J. O. Smith, a settler, bought her for £102 and sold the ship's timbers to people building houses. "Smith's Folly" became a profitable business. In the end Smith was ordered to remove the wreck. He did so with a huge charge of gunpowder that shook early Port Elizabeth to its foundations.

Three years after the *Thunderbolt* wreck the Cape Receife lighthouse was built. Forty years later, on a fine night, the keeper noticed a steamer heading inshore to certain destruction. The ship was the

three thousand ton freighter *Strathllane*; and as the keeper watched she blew down her boilers amid a white pillar of steam. Captain Nimmo and his men landed safely in the boats, and he explained that he had been forced to beach his ship after striking an uncharted pinnacle rock. He asked for a bath, and then set off unperturbed in a Cape cart for Port Elizabeth. The ship became a total loss, but the court of inquiry held that the captain was in no way to blame.

A third drama of the sea (at which the Cape Receife keepers again formed a reluctant audience) occurred shortly before World War I. It was a bright moonlight night when they sighted the German steamer *Itzehoe* swinging in towards the lighthouse. She was a ship of unusual design, with two slender funnels side by side. The astounded keepers saw her heading straight for their front-door; and she came so close that they yelled a warning and waved their arms in a last-minute effort to save her.

Inevitably she became a total loss. And the wreck of the *Itzehoe* remains as great a mystery as the stranding of the *Thunderbolt*. Other ships have struck the reef since then – the *Roman* and the *Dover Castle* – and the port authorities look upon

this foul ground as an ocean graveyard. Several old, condemned vessels have been “buried” there. Only a few years ago the tug *James Searle* (one of the world’s oldest tugs at the age of fifty-three) was towed out and cast adrift there to break up and leave her bones on Thunderbolt Reef, within sight of the bay and modern harbour where she had toiled for so long.

No lighthouse is proof against human frailties, and it is a fact that wrecks tend to cluster thickly round lighthouses, just as Merriman said. A century ago Captain Wilson, the Table Bay harbourmaster, was asked by a commission of inquiry whether he would recommend a lighthouse on Robben Island. He replied firmly: “A light placed on the island would remove every shadow of excuse, under ordinary circumstances, for any man getting his vessel on shore in any part of Table Bay during the night.” Captain Wilson would shudder if he could see the wrecks which have occurred since he gave that honest opinion.

Keeping the Union’s lights burning bright and clear is an endless task. Through the centuries the lights have changed from bonfires to candles, from oil lamps to gas burners and electricity. Great

engineers have influenced the design of the stately towers along the Cape coast and the mechanism within; among them Thomas Stevenson, father of Robert Louis Stevenson. Old iron towers have to be encased in concrete. New fog signals, new lamps, even new lighthouses have to be provided. “Keep the light burning bright and clear from sunset to sunrise.” Devotion to duty is the spirit of the lighthouse service, and the men of the lighthouses are strong characters in the solitude they bear so well.

Chapter 8

FANGS OF THE SEA

ALWAYS THE sea has been my friend, though I am fully aware of hidden dangers below that lovely surface. On this beach I have seen man-eating sharks and sting-rays brought in by fishermen. I have no doubt that the great octopus visits these rocks. And I have watched a man with more confidence than I possess lift up a deadly sea snake by the tail.

Yet in all the years I have known this beach, nothing more harmful than the blue polyp we call the Portuguese man-o'-war has touched me. I had a fright, though, one summer day more than twenty years ago, when a school of large man-eating sharks entered Table Bay. (You may remember that a reward of fifty pounds was offered for the capture of a large specimen, as this was regarded as a possible treat for up-country visitors.) Well, I was out fishing in my tiny dinghy off the Blaauwberg rocks when I observed one of the man-eating sharks cruising along the fringe of kelp. My boat was fast to the kelp, but I cast off within a few seconds and pulled for the shore.

Of course there are people who delight in assuring you that sharks never bite unless they are molested, and that the shark danger has been greatly exaggerated. However, I knew two men who escaped from the jaws of man-eaters in False Bay; and I have seen a fishing boat which had been attacked by a shark. Yes, I pulled for the shore.

Most of the two hundred and fifty species of sharks are harmless, I admit, and the ordinary citizen is no more likely to be killed by a shark than he is likely to be struck by lightning. However, the South African coast has its fair share of dangerous sharks. I do not like coming face to face with these creatures.

Scientists have laid down that the shark menace is greater in tropical seas than in temperate waters. Some years ago a scientist in the United States offered a reward to anyone who could prove that any shark had ever attacked a human being in cold water, and no one claimed the money. But a number of shocked and helpless people at Fourth Beach, Clifton, saw a young medical student being carried off by a man-eater in November, 1942; and the water at Clifton is too cold for most people.



Of course there are people who delight in assuring you that sharks never bite unless they are molested.

I have traced another shark tragedy in the icy current that flows up the coast of South West Africa. A fishing-boat working in Sandwich Harbour (to the south of Walvis Bay) was surrounded by man-eaters. The sharks attacked and upset the boat, and four coloured men were torn to pieces. When you think of the number of people who have been attacked in the warm waters of False Bay and along the Natal coast, of course, you realise that the statement about tropical waters holds good in South Africa. I believe the average in Natal is two victims a year.

Sharks have started many a controversy, and the relative ferocity of the different species is often hotly debated. Largest of all the tribe are the whale sharks and basking sharks, both known in South African waters though both are extremely rare here. Both species run up to fifty feet or more in length. Whale sharks appear about once in a century in South Africa, and are pounced upon by museum officials. The sluggish and sun-loving basking shark is a more frequent visitor. I remember a twenty-eight foot basking shark, weighing about five tons, which was dragged ashore in a net by one of the Trautmanns of Haut Bay after a struggle that lasted

two hours. Twice the shark leapt clear of the water in spite of the net clinging to its great bulk. It took fourteen bullets to kill that shark. Unfortunately this is a rarity without much value, and it was too large for the museum authorities to handle. Whale and basking sharks feed on small organisms and their gentle natures have never been doubted.

Basking sharks often cruise in "line ahead" formation, with dorsal fins showing above the surface. Many reports of sea serpents had their origin in this spectacle. Decomposed basking sharks assume weird shapes, and when thrown up on beaches they are described as "unknown sea – monsters".

A queer and dubious customer is the hammerhead shark. Adults have heads shaped like broad, double hammers, with their eyes at the extremities. Naturalists cannot explain this fantastic growth, but it is believed to give them a wide range of vision. You see dozens of them in the clear water along the Angola coast, and I started an argument in a Portuguese liner near Mossamedes when I declared that they were harmless. The Portuguese were so vehement that I have been studying the hammer-head's record ever since that day.

It came as a surprise to me when I found the hammerhead listed by the U.S. Air Force research institute as a dangerous shark. (Others were the carcharodons, including the great white shark, and the tiger shark, mako shark, mackerel shark, sand shark and grey shark.) I have not traced a single attack by a hammerhead in South African waters, though the species is not rare in Cape and Natal seas. American opinion seems to be based on the discovery of human remains in a hammerhead's stomach a century and a half ago; but that does not prove an attack on a living person.

Professor J. L. B. Smith, of coelacanth fame, describes the large hammerhead as ferocious and fearless. It has been known to attack boats. Hugh Copley holds the same opinion. Francesca la Monte, an American authority, recently declared that the hammerhead was considered dangerous in Australian waters. The late Dr. E. G. Boulenger of the London Zoo classed them as "most dreaded of all the shark tribe", but he must have been referring to their appearance.

Fifteen-foot hammerheads weigh up to a thousand pounds, and one weighing over six hundred pounds has been taken on rod and line in Natal waters. But

they are not much use to anyone. The livers yield oil, the fins can be used for soup, and the hungry Japanese make a low-grade fishcake by mixing the flesh with rice.

No one ever scoffs at the carcharodons, which include Durban's blue pointers and the true man-eater or great white shark. Defenders of sharks may say that they will attack a man only when very hungry and after scenting blood; but many a man has met death in the jaws of a carcharodon. According to the old Swedish naturalist Linnaeus, it was a large carcharodon that swallowed Jonah; and indeed this shark could take a man in one piece. Professor Smith gives forty feet as the maximum length, but I have discovered a record of a carcharodon forty-three feet long, caught in False Bay many years ago. A ship had come in with plague on board, there had been a number of sea burials, and sharks had followed her all the way into False Bay.

Some of the smaller sharks are a greater menace than the carcharodons because they are encountered far more often. Durban's sinister grey shark never seems to exceed seven feet, and five footers have inflicted serious wounds. The blackfin shark, very

similar to the grey in size and appearance, is another killer. Both swim close inshore. They will attack racehorses or dogs as well as human beings in shallow water.

Tiger sharks, in spite of the name, prefer offal to human beings. But they are far from harmless, and Professor Smith has heard of a tiger shark that cut a man clean in half with one bite. A fourteen-footer landed at Durban had in its stomach the head and forequarters of a crocodile, the hind leg of a sheep, three seagulls, a cigarette tin, and two unopened tins of green peas. I have also heard of a sting ray found in a tiger shark's stomach, the sting having had no effect. Porpoises and turtles are other victims. This shark is caught on hand-lines in Durban, and six hundred pounders have been landed. The skin makes a beautiful leather.

Blue sharks, of the ominous "requiem" family, have a bad reputation among seamen, but I doubt whether an attack on a human being has ever been proved. They have gathered in force after shipwrecks, and their taste for corpses is notorious. I think they owe their reputation to the fight they put up when hooked and hauled on board ship. They appear to be completely oblivious to pain. A

blue shark which was gutted and thrown back was caught again on a hook baited with its own intestines. Old-time sailor men made walking-sticks from the backbones of these sharks.

Sharks hardly ever kill a woman. Durban lifesavers declare that this is merely because men venture farther out to sea. Natal records show that there have been no female casualties since 1914, when an Indian woman was bitten. It is not often that a man survives two attacks, but this was the experience of Mr. G. B. Botha of Durban. His thigh was lacerated on the first occasion in 1944, and three years later a shark tackled his left foot.

One of the strangest shark tragedies ever known in South Africa occurred when a new concrete wharf was being constructed at Durban years ago. Divers were at work on a foundation which gradually rose to low water mark. Between the foundation and the shore a large shallow pool was formed; and on the day after the concrete wall was completed, a young Indian boy went swimming there. Screams were heard, and the boy was brought to the shore with one leg missing. He died a few minutes afterwards. Then it was found that a shark had been trapped and walled in by the foundation.

Often the stomach of a dead shark has told a ghastly tale. Six sharks were hooked at Port Elizabeth one day in 1871, soon after the wreck of the ship *Western Hope* on Bird Island. One of the stomachs revealed a snuff-box which was identified as the property of a passenger in the *Western Hope*. Much more recently a shark was being cut up for sale in the market at Lourenco Marques when a hand with a ring was found. Probably the greatest mass attack by sharks occurred in November, 1942, when the steamer *Nova Scotia* was torpedoed off Durban with Italian prisoners-of-war on board. Seven hundred and fifty men died that night. Many of them would have been rescued, but the bodies were found on the surface in lifejackets with limbs missing.

It is possible to fight a shark with bare hands and escape. Brave men have done it again and again. Experts used to advise anyone in this appalling predicament to ride the shark like a bronco, or hang on to a fin and move along with the shark until it becomes afraid and sheers off. But no one seemed inclined to follow this technique, and so a new method has been put forward.

Kick out hard. Sharks prefer a motionless victim.

Hit the shark with your fist on the snout or gills or in the eye. Keep out of the direct line of the shark's rush. Do not imagine that the shark has to turn on its back to bite you. A shark has a large mouth, and it can bite in any position. Do not "tread water", however, as a person in this position forms an easier target than one lying horizontally on the surface.

Rays are close relatives of the sharks, more powerful, weird to gaze upon. They are simply sharks "rolled flat" with their side fins shaped like huge wings. Largest of the tribe is the monster which Cape Coloured fishermen call *see-duiwel*, the sea-devil, devil-fish, or manta ray. Some of those in South African seas measure over twenty feet from wingtip to wingtip, and weigh over two tons.

Manta rays become dangerous only when harpooned, or when divers are at work. Manta is Spanish for shawl and many fishermen believe that the manta will wrap itself round a human victim, holding him firmly with its flippers, and then devour him at leisure. In fact, the manta eats tiny fish. It has a habit of leaping clear of the water, dropping like a thunder-clap, and if a large harpooned manta falls on a frail boat there may be a tragedy.

John Craig, a diver who made underwater films, lost a comrade as a result of an attack by a manta ray. Life line and airline snapped. Craig went down to see what had happened, and brought, the camera to the surface. The diver had vanished, but when the film was developed the mystery was solved.

It showed the side of a submerged wreck with the diver approaching. Something darkened the scene. The diver looked up, and a large manta ray swept into the picture. The ray paused over the diver, then deliberately seized the life line and air line in its flippers. It lifted the diver off his feet, and at that moment the life line fouled a rib of the wreck and parted. The manta became excited. It turned and rushed at the diver, striking him and carrying him towards the camera. The camera fell over, the film zig-zagged and stopped.

Manta rays swim into the Buffalo River at East London occasionally. Three mantas arrived together not long after World War I, when a diver named Farrell was at work on harbour construction. Diver Palmer, who was assisting, told me that he saw Farrell struggling with “a fish the size of a room”. It had become entangled in Farrell’s life line, and Farrell was bruised while escaping from this

menace. These rays were regarded as a danger to the small ferries crossing the river, and two were killed.

A manta ray captured in the Buffalo River ten years ago had a span of seventeen feet, and weighed two thousand five hundred pounds. Such a specimen is of great interest to museums. Little is known of the manta’s life, and comparatively few have been preserved. For some unknown reason males appear to be rare, and those captured are nearly always females. A cast was made of this manta after a most exhausting effort in transporting it to the local museum.

Sting-rays or stingarees, the dreaded *pylstert* (arrow-tail) of the Cape fishermen, have killed unsuspecting, bare-footed people who have stepped on them in shallow water. You will need immediate medical attention if you are unlucky enough to encounter one of these flat, hidden fish; for the pain is intense and the danger very real. A doctor who was struck by a spotted eagle ray wrote: “The poisoned sting was driven into my leg, two inches deep, above the knee and touched the bone. It produced instantly a pain more horrible than I had thought it possible that a man could suffer.”

Medical research workers thought until recently that it was the serrated spine of the sting-ray that caused the damage. Even now the exact nature of the irritant poison is unknown; but the poison glands have been discovered. Gangrene and tetanus have followed the poisoning. Shock and general ill-health are severe, and the septic wound takes a long time to heal.

If you, catch a sting-ray on rod and line, cut the line and let it go. A sting-ray in the trek-net is treated with great respect. Some of the species found in Cape waters are rare; and one, landed by the late Mr. W. P. Schreiner as recently as 1911 (and now known as Schreiner's sting-ray), was then identified as a new species. Another rarity is the purple sting-ray, first described by Sir Andrew Smith early last century, and next seen in 1933, when Mr. C. L. Biden caught one.

Giant rays and sharks fight savagely among themselves. One such battle on the Durban front became so fierce that the lifesavers had to call all bathers out of the water. It started as a commotion in the water forty yards out, when the huge fins of the opponents were seen. For fifteen minutes the struggle raged and the breakers were discoloured

with blood. Shark and ray then swam out to sea.

Only once in my life have I seen the poisonous sea snake of Cape waters, *Pelamys platurus*, not to be confused with the slimy, toothless, snake-like fish which sometimes takes the disgusted angler's bait.

Fifty species of sea snakes have been classified, all front-fanged relatives of the cobras. The one found in South African waters has a black back, yellow belly and flat tail with spots on it; a creature to avoid at all costs, every bit as deadly as any snake on land. Admittedly, the sea snake has not a bad reputation anywhere, but that is only because it lives deep down in holes and crannies, and seldom emerges into open water.

Dr. J. A. Pringle, a former director of the Port Elizabeth museum and snake park, has stated that he has been unable to trace an authentic record of a bite from this snake at any point on the South African coast. His predecessor Fitzsimons, however, declared that many fatalities had occurred when people mistook sea snakes for eels and caught hold of them; and he quoted a naval officer, bitten a few years before World War I, who lost his life. Fitzsimons also mentioned a Coloured man who

brought a sea snake to the museum in a tin, pulled it out and received a bite. Immediate treatment with permanganate of potash and serum saved his life. Advocate S. Schoeman has described the death of a Coloured man named Hendrik Kleinbooi at Soutgat on the Cape coast. Kleinbooi hooked a sea snake, thought it was an eel, and tried to remove the hook from the mouth. The snake bit off two fingers and injected the poison which killed Kleinbooi within half an hour.

Sea snakes become easily exhausted by currents near the surface, and are washed up to lie helpless on the beach. You may recognise them by the paddle-shaped tail. Specimens above thirty inches in length are rare on South African beaches, but a three-foot sea snake was found at Fish Hoek some years ago. Sometimes they are left in rock pools by the ebb tide. Once a sea snake found itself in the St. James Pool and struck terror into the bathers.

Beside the sea snake, the Portuguese man-o'-war, *physalia* or blue bottle must seem almost benevolent. Yet these jelly-fish may cause exquisite pain or even death in a person especially sensitive to the poison. The Portuguese man-o'-war is really an air-filled bladder or raft floating on the surface

and trailing a number of long tentacles. Each tentacle is covered with tiny, stinging capsules. Fish up to twelve inches in length are caught, paralysed and devoured by the blue-bottle community under the raft.

Enormous shoals of Portuguese men-o'-war drift on to the Cape beaches at times. Then the unwary bather hurries home with red weal's across his body and seeks the calamine bottle, or a mixture of picric acid and camphor dissolved in methylated spirits. Meanwhile the delicate, inflated gas-sacs lie in thousands on the beaches, and small boys (wearing shoes, of course) march along the margin of the sea popping the enemy.

I was surprised to find the sea urchin rated by a well-known Cape Town frogman as the creature causing the greatest distress among divers and bathers. He explained that the spines which protect the shell are mildly poisonous and break off in human flesh on contact. Moreover, these spines cannot be removed as easily as splinters or thorns. Often you have to use a needle.

Last of these horrors lurking in Cape seas is the octopus or *seekat*. His cousin the squid or *tjokka*

(obviously a Malay name) must not be overlooked. Both these cephalopods are found as giants, and though I have never been able to trace a fatality, I have met several men who have found themselves gripped by the tentacles and who escaped with difficulty.

Possibly the most serious ordeal was that of a girl of twelve who was standing in a shallow, rocky pool in False Bay when a large octopus (trapped by the falling tide) emerged and seized her legs. She screamed for help, but it was ten minutes or more before the tentacles were cut away. In that time the shock drove the child out of her mind, and she never recovered fully.

You have seen the evil-looking suckers which the octopus has on its eight arms. The squid has two long tentacles and eight short ones, also equipped with the strong “vacuum cups”. Both octopus and squid use their tentacles as whips, and the monsters of the tribe leave deep scars on whales. To add to the horror, both octopus and squid have jaws like the beak of a parrot.

Stand on the jetty at Port Nolloth on a calm evening and you may see an enormous octopus searching

the bay for crawfish. The harbour is noted for these monsters. Saldanha Bay is another of their haunts, as a treasure diver once discovered. The giants seem to prefer the western shores of the Cape to the warmer waters of the east coast.

Many fishermen from Madeira (a great place for large octopus and squid) have settled at the Cape, and they are experts in catching all sorts of cephalopods. “I started as a boy, diving for the octopus and taking them with my bare hands,” a Madeira fisherman told me. “Of course you must choose a place where the octopus can’t cling on to anything. Never touch one with tentacles longer than three feet. I tackled one that was just a bit too big, and it kept me down there for sixty seconds before I got away. But there is a way of escaping from a big octopus, if you get the chance. Put your hand and arm right into his mouth and turn him inside out, like an umbrella. He’ll let go at once if you do that.”

John Craig, the diver I have already mentioned, regarded the octopus as a timid and retiring creature. He said that the octopus reached for a diver out of sheer curiosity, and if the diver stood perfectly still the octopus would soon go away. But

if the diver cut at the tentacle with his knife the octopus would wrap itself round him in sheer fright. If the octopus brought its beak into play the canvas diving suit would be cut to shreds.

I met a diver named Faulds who disagreed strongly with Craig's theory. Faulds was at work in Durban harbour when he felt something grip him below the knee. It was a tentacle, and the octopus tried to pull him into its lair below a concrete block. Fortunately there was another diver on the job, and Faulds was able to place his helmet next to the other man and ask for help. The other diver cut off the tentacle and both men then gave the alarm signal. They exploded a charge of dynamite before going down again.

Fifty million was the estimate of the octopus and squid population in South African waters given by a marine biologist to a meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science in Cape Town some years ago. "Take any portion of the False Bay coast you like, and I'll catch you half a dozen while you wait," declared the scientist.

Some of the visitors challenged the local marine biologist to carry out his promise. They gathered on

the rocks outside their hotel at St. James, and the biologist appeared in bathing costume carrying a bamboo with a barbed hook. He caught his six octopuses all right; small ones, but all true members of the species.

Portuguese and Italians eat octopus and squid, and so do I when I can get them. Years ago the squid brought in by Cape trawlers were sold as bait. Now it has become a delicacy, and the price has gone up. After all, the cephalopods are shellfish – relatives of the oysters and mussels. Why not enjoy them? It is far more pleasant to eat than to be eaten.

Chapter 9

BIRDS OF MY BEACH

*"Goneys an' gullies an' all the birds o' the sea
They ain't no birds, not really," said Billy the
Dane*

*"Not mollies, nor gullies, nor goneys at all,"
said he,*

*"But simply the sperrits of mariners livin'
again."*

John Masefield

KING OF all the seabirds that sweep over Table Bay is the wandering albatross. Seldom do I observe this huge gliding petrel from my beach, though I have seen a dead albatross on the sand after a gale, a fine old fellow with a wingspan of about eleven feet. Probably it had died of starvation as a result of the heavy weather.

Table Bay knows the wandering albatross well. Once you are at sea in the southern oceans the wanderer is there, always hungry, soaring magnificently over the stern, spending most of his life in the air. This is not only the giant of the oceans, but also the largest flier in the world. A wingspan of seventeen feet has been reported,

which means a body-weight of about seventeen pounds. So you can identify the wanderer by its size and its white appearance, with black-and-white wings.

No seabird is more typical of Cape waters. For that reason, and because albatross feathers were made into rugs, the old-time sailor men called him the "Cape sheep". His hollow wing-bones were used as pipe stems, while the skin of the feet could be worked up into tobacco pouches. Contrary to popular belief, it was never considered unlucky to hook a wandering albatross with a lump of pork. Coleridge's poem dealt with the curse which fell on the ancient mariner who killed a sooty albatross. Many an old seaman believed that the sooty albatross was the reincarnation of a man lost at sea. The wanderer, however, is regarded as fair game.

For centuries bird watchers have been puzzled by the way the wandering albatross will follow a ship. Is it the same bird you see day after day? Does he sleep on the wing? And why the fondness for ships when the ocean is full of the natural food of the species?

One marked albatross once followed a ship for three

thousand miles, so that mystery has been cleared up. It is thought nowadays that the albatross rests on the surface of the ocean and feeds at night, catching up with the ship at daybreak. Scraps of food thrown overboard are welcome, but the albatross still prefers cuttlefish and fish. Airmen have discovered that the albatross glides along astern of ships to take advantage of upward air currents. This saving of effort is greatly appreciated by a bird which has been found bearing a tell-tale ring six thousand miles from its breeding-place.

Sailors do not regard the wanderer with affection. In spite of its noble appearance, this feathered giant is a pitiless savage with a snarling voice, a deadly menace sometimes when a man falls overboard. They have attacked drowning sailors and picked their eyes out.

Ships entering Table Bay are accompanied almost up to the land by the sooty albatross. I do not know why seamen should call this smaller albatross the “blue bird”, for it is a glossy black all over with white eyelids, wedge-shaped tail, and long narrow wings. Even the wanderer cannot rival this bird as a master of the air. But there is something uncanny about the sooty albatross as it ranges alongside a

ship, inspecting each knot and splice with critical eye. No wonder you hear a seaman murmur: “How long ago was it that you went overboard, shipmate?”

Cape fishermen catch the mollymawk or yellow-nosed albatross for the pot. I saw them often in the old Rogge Bay fish market, where the Malay fishwives were pleased to call them *seekalkoen*. They are not unpalatable, but it takes a good cook to make them taste like turkey. Darwin said there were more mollymawks in the world than any other bird, but since his day scientists have declared that the whole albatross race is in danger of extinction. The “molly”, or “mollyhawk” of the Norwegians, gained its name from the old Nederlands word *mallemok* (foolish gull). Its body is about three feet long, with a black upper surface to the wings and tail.

Trawler men see more of the albatrosses than anyone else in Cape waters. Indeed, there is no place like a trawler for the study of seabirds, as I discovered during a hard but memorable week in the *James Pitchers* off the Cape west coast years ago. I saw most of the petrels, from the giant petrel to Mother Carey’s chickens. The brown giant runs

up to a wingspan of eight feet. It is also known as the Nelly, Sea Devil, Glutton Bird or Stinker; and as the nicknames imply, it is a scavenger and a killer of smaller birds. A giant petrel caught by Cape trawler men not long ago was found to have been ringed by Australian scientists on Heard Island, near the Antarctic Circle.

“Cape pigeons” are petrels, common in Table Bay though they seldom come on shore. You cannot mistake them, for they are the size of a hen, mottled black and white, with black head and white under body. There is also the “Cape hen”, a very common black petrel with a white bill and chin.

Smallest of all the petrels, and indeed of all sea-birds are the Mother Carey’s chickens. The name is a corruption of Mater Cara (Virgin Mary). It is strange that the albatross, largest bird of the air, should have this near-relative which is smaller even than a sparrow. You rarely see it near the shore. However, there was a famous occasion in Simonstown shortly before World War I when many thousands of these almost unknown visitors to the Cape perched on the railway station and other roofs. No one ever solved that mystery.

Mother Carey’s chickens are the storm petrels, of course, and seamen expect heavy weather when they gather round ships. The explanation is that the tiny birds find it easier to feed in the wake of a ship when the sea is rough. They pat the water with their feet when feeding, appearing to walk on the water. Storm petrels are full of oil. If ever you are shipwrecked on an island where they breed, you can string a wick through one and burn it like a candle.

I have wandered from my beach, but here are the terns making their landfall. Their name in Afrikaans is *seeswavel*, and this is appropriate as they have forked tails and fly gracefully over enormous distances. A tern ringed in Sweden was picked up on a False Bay beach, and this was far from a record. Arctic terns breed near the North Pole and migrate to the Antarctic; while others fly round the Cape to Australia. No other bird covers such distances, for the Arctic tern must fly more than twenty thousand miles a year.

Several tern species breed on the South African coast; the pale grey Caspian tern, the swift tern with yellow bill, and the abundant common tern with its black head and grey back. Terns are clean feeders. They plunge into the sea after live fish, and you will

not see them hovering over refuse like the gulls. Women's hats have been trimmed with the feathers of these birds, for some have pale grey and white plumage with a roseate tinge.

Only three gulls breed in South Africa, though the blackguards called skuas come in from the ocean like seafaring vultures to rob and kill. Always on my beach there are the southern black-backed gull and Hartlaub's gull. Kalk Bay fishing boats sometimes bring in a catch of these gulls and sell them on the pier for two or three shillings apiece. Coloured housewives know how to prepare them. You must cut up a gull, soak it in vinegar overnight, and fry, roast or curry it next day.

Southern black-backed gulls lay their pale green eggs inconspicuously on the more remote sandy beaches. These are the gulls you see quarrelling over any carrion from a drowned rat to a dead whale. They are clubbed and shot at sight on the guano islands, for they steal gannet and penguin eggs. Hartlaub's gull breeds on the Saldanha Bay islands; but many of the eggs are collected, and many chicks are killed so that the guano-producing

birds will not suffer.¹

The third resident South African gull, strange to say, is rare on the west coast. This bird, the grey-headed gull, breeds far inland near the great vleis, and prefers the coast to the north of Durban. All the gulls fly willingly inland when they discover the dumping ground of a city's refuse. Paarden Island has its colonies of gulls. And for some unexplained reason, the gulls have formed the habit in recent years of attending the rugby matches at Newlands. Perhaps the spectators leave a few crumbs for them.

Among the plovers that love the coast are the Kittlitz sand plover and the crowned plover or *Kiewietjie*, I have watched the Kittlitz on Dassen Island, where its eggs are in constant danger from duikers and penguins. As the Kittlitz leaves its nest it gives a couple of rapid but skilful kicks so that the two yellow eggs are hidden completely by sand.

Crowned plovers have a contempt for civilisation which often leads them into danger. The late Dr. Leonard Gill found them breeding on Green Point Common on the site of a recent exhibition. And on

¹ See Lawrence Green's *At Daybreak for the Isles* for full descriptions of the guano island birds.

Paarden Island, where factories were being built, he came upon a pair of crowned plovers trying to defend their young against a party of children who were throwing stones. The plovers were swooping boldly at the heads of the attackers when Dr. Gill arrived. He sent the children away, and when peace had been restored one of the birds ran up to him, stopped and shook its feathers with an air of relief as though it was trying to say: "So that's over-thanks very much." Such was the personal experience of one of South Africa's finest ornithologists.

Much smaller than the plovers is a close relative, the turnstone. You may observe them on the rocks at Blaauwberg, a bird with a white head with black lines and bright chestnut back when in autumn breeding plumage. A lover of sandhoppers and other insects, it will turn over small stones and contrive by digging to move logs so that the food beneath may be exposed. Formations of little sanderlings are also to be seen on the beach, dodging the waves, but snatching at all the small crustaceans when the waves recede. Like the turnstones, they breed in the Arctic and come to my beach in the southern summer.

More conspicuous than the plovers and sanderlings are the black oyster-catchers; for they are large and black with scarlet beaks and pink legs. I have never seen an oyster-catcher opening an oyster, but they have no difficulty at all with black mussels. The gulls have to drop their mussels on the rocks or hard road before they can eat. Oyster-catchers insert their sharp beaks.

You may not have thought of the *dikkop* as a shore bird, but it has always been fond of Robben Island and many of them nest in the dunes along Blaauwberg beach. Few see them, for they are elusive night birds and they know how to take cover. A *dikkop* is good eating, rather like the *korhaan*; but they destroy insect pests and thus earn the complete protection of the law.

In the spring, and again in early winter, I walk down my beach towards Cape Town, turning inland to Riet Vlei. Only a row or two of dunes separate this wonderland of water from the beach; yet here is another world of birds with all its majesty and mystery. This is an almost unspoilt sanctuary. Here in the weedbeds and river, the mud banks and the estuary, birds of the ocean meet birds of fresh water.

Nearly every year the aristocratic flamingos are there, sometimes in hundreds. Massive white pelicans soar with surprising grace, and if you are lucky the rare pink-backed pelican may reveal himself. I love rarities, and always hope to see the whistling duck which seldom visit the Cape. More than thirty years ago a large flock spent a summer on the Cape Peninsula vleis; but two decades passed before they came again. Cape shovellers are plentiful enough; once regarded as rare, they have been counted at Riet Vlei in hundreds. Teal and widgeon revel in these waters. Shelduck are common, and coveys of Egyptian geese arrive from their mysterious breeding places.

You can rely on colonies of herons and egrets at Riet Vlei at any time of year. Herons are no longer valued as table-birds, though once they were eaten by the hundred in spite of their dark flesh and fishy taste. The tame grey heron is one of the typical birds of South Africa, grotesque rather than stately, but handsome and fast in the air. Their pale blue eggs are beautiful. Let the malachite kingfishers flash past unheeded. Leave all these birds and the swifts and stilts and swallows, painted snipe and avocets, curlew sandpipers and long-legged

greenshanks and return to the shore. Here on the beach I am really at home. The oceanic birds are my favourites. Many people, and not only castaways, have lived on seabirds. I admire the albatross, and I may tell you that I have eaten this bird and its eggs.

It was on Tristan da Cunha that a platter of albatross came my way. I was there twice in the lean times, long before the commercial fishing industry had been established; the days when a ship might call once a year and the islanders lived on their own resources. So they killed the yellow-nosed albatross, the “molly”, for meat. Last century the wandering albatross bred on the peak of Tristan, in the old volcanic crater. Hungry islanders climbed to its eyries six thousand feet above the sea, and in the course of the century they ate the lot. They called it “goney”.

Now they have to go to the neighbouring isles of Inaccessible and Nightingale for their sea poultry. They take the young mollymawks, thousands for food and thousands more to be “tried down” for the fat and oil. Shearwaters and their eggs are also eaten on a large scale. The trick with albatross meat is to skin the bird as soon as possible after it has

been killed; then the fishy taint is removed. Young “goney” is as white and tender as chicken, though it has a different flavour. As for the huge eggs of the albatross, they are delicious, with golden yolks.

So the albatross reminds me of the cottages of Tristan, and Mrs Frances Repetto entertaining me to the food of the island. Stewed “goney” and berry pie in a thatched cottage a thousand miles from anywhere. Yes, the albatross has come to my beach all the way from Tristan to recall old times.

Chapter 10

FISH LORE

ALL THE fish in Cape seas must have been thrown up on my beach, singly or in thousands, through the centuries. Long, long ago the first beachcombers were scouring these sands for the refuse of the ocean; baiting their fish-kraals wherever the rocks allowed them to trap the shoals as the tides went out; spearing the larger fish with bone points or stone harpoons. And all along the coast they left their kitchen middens, proof that they feasted on the fish we catch today, and some others.

They knew nothing of the Agulhas Bank, the fabulous Dogger Bank of South Africa, or those other off-shore trawling grounds where thousands of men now harvest millions of tons of fish. I am always being astounded by man's appetite for fish and the prices some men will pay for luxuries from the sea. Not that I regard the crawfish as a luxury. I used to knock limpets off the rocks at Blaauwberg, bait my circular crawfish nets, and bring in enough for several families after an hour's pleasant work in my little dinghy. Yet in Johannesburg and Durban some people will buy crawfish at ten shillings each. Not the rock lobster Newburg or crawfish cocktail

of the restaurants. Just the boiled crawfish on the slabs of the fishmongers. Yet this is the same creature which the boys catch with their bare hands at low tide in the Blaauwberg kelp. I have seen the crawfish through the clear water, like dozens of great brown sea spiders walking on the sand.

Fish lore is a rich and romantic study, with by-ways which fascinate me even more than the highways – especially when they lead to a feast. I was fortunate in my tutors. Among them was John Bickerdyke (whose real name was Cook), famous in his day as the author of a classic work on sea fishing. This was published as far back as 1895 in the Badminton Library. Bickerdyke had also written a novel, a book on beer and ale, and other books on hunting and fishing before he settled in South Africa early this century. Unfortunately he wrote little on Cape fishing, though he loved it and knew the Cape waters intimately.

Bickerdyke owned a farm on the Berg River and a house overlooking the Langebaan lagoon. He built a little jetty on his lagoon property so that he could bring his small cabin cruiser with outboard motor alongside; and he must have caught all the Saldanha Bay varieties of fish. Once he brought home a

monster skate, I remember. But it was not success as an angler that made John Bickerdyke memorable. It was his zest for the sea and the coast, his love of the river fringed with reeds and willows, the white beach at Langebaan with its row of farmers' cottages, the bird islands in the bay, the sheltered coves and the rocks where the galjoen and Cape salmon gathered.

Not only in his youth but in his last years this man found perpetual refreshment in these quiet surroundings. The source of his pleasure was always there, lapping against his home. Every room in his Langebaan house looked out over the water, towards his fishing marks. Old age, when it spares the senses, is no hindrance to the solace of the tides.

Another wise guide I had in the world of fish was Mr. E. J. Smith, a Cape Town health inspector who kept an expert eye on the old Rogge Bay fish market. If anything unusual came in he would telephone the newspaper office and I would hasten gladly down to the waterfront to record the event.

Smith (if you pardon an interesting digression) was the man who gained temporary fame more than forty years ago by his escape from an underground

freezing chamber in Dock Road. He was inspecting meat one Saturday afternoon with a Coloured youth named Jonas when some fool slammed the door, locked up and went home. Smith and Jonas were left in a temperature twenty-five degrees below zero.

No one heard their shouts. The door was so massive, with its hard timber and insulating material, that it could not be battered down. Nevertheless, my friend Smith worked desperately on that door for six and a half hours, until he had made a gap through which he and Jonas crawled. They were short of breath, almost frozen, with their chests on fire. Another locked door faced them, but this was a thin door and someone heard the noise. Smith spent weeks in bed after that ordeal.

In the fish market one day Smith pointed out to me the large crawfish which people were buying. "Why do they do it?" he inquired. "They always go for the big ones, possibly ten or even twenty years old, with coarse flesh as tough as a boot, and just as difficult to digest."

He was right, of course. I remembered that undersized crawfish were caught specially for



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Government House years ago. Small crawfish of legal size are tender, like chicken. Not many people seem to know it.

Crawfish decompose rapidly after death. That is why they are usually dropped into boiling water while still alive and sold as boiled crawfish. (Death is instantaneous, and the R.S.P.C.A. approves of this method.) If boiled alive, the tail curls inwards towards the stomach. But when a dead crawfish is boiled the straight tail gives the show away. You should also reject a crawfish if the tail flesh crumbles instead of coming out in one piece.

Smith always declared that small soles were best for frying, large ones for boiling. If the skin did not rip off a sole easily, it was not fresh. He was always on the lookout for “milky” stockfish, “black” stockfish and “pap” snoek. Hottentot, he said, should be eaten within twenty-four hours of being caught. He defended the bamboo fish, or *mooi nooientjie* (pretty girl), also known as the stink fish, explaining that its diet of seaweed gave out a peculiar smell when the fish was cleaned. Nevertheless, it is sound food.

Once he called me down to the market to see a

rarity, the scabbard fish, with pointed head and smooth body shaped like a ribbon. The flesh is excellent, but as a rule you have to go all the way to New Zealand to find it in abundance. It is a very swift fish which swims with undulating movements. Never since then have I seen this lovely fish with golden stripes.

Another fish (by no means a rarity) which Smith pointed out to me was the Joseph or Josup, known to the fishermen as the Doodskop or Death’s Head. This oddity belongs to the scientific order of “ghost sharks”, and is sometimes called the “elephant shark” because of the fleshy trunk on the end of the snout. Large black egg-cases which you see on the sand belong to this creature. Though it looks repulsive, the Joseph can be eaten.

The name Joseph is a riddle, though I have heard that it is a corruption of Joodsviis. Now the Joodsviis is the Jew Fish of Australia, and this in turn is a corruption of jewel Fish. All three names apply to the *kabeljou* of the Cape, otherwise known as salmon-bass or cob. (Fish names often make my brain reel and call for a feat of memory.) *Kabeljou* came from Holland in the form of *Kabeljaauw*, which is said to be a corruption of the Portuguese

bacalhau, the national fish dish.

Smith, like other enthusiasts, had made a study of the origins of Cape fish names. It is a strange fact that not a single Bushman or Hottentot fish name has survived. Most of the Cape species were named by the Hollanders, some by their Malay slaves, and a number by the British last century.

Malay names often go all the way back to the East Indies, and some cannot be explained. There is the *bafaro* or wreckfish. A trawler once netted five tons of delicious *bafaro* near a wreck in sixty fathoms; but that was a sensational catch, and line fishermen hardly ever see this rare fish. Another mysterious Malay name is *assous* for the Cape anchovy. It is a transparent, tasty little fish similar to those imported from Portugal in glass jars at a high price. Seabirds feast on them, but they are never caught because small-meshed nets are prohibited for fear of destroying baby pilchards. Finally there is the *severrim* of unknown origin; the *bontrok* in Afrikaans, the fish with a coat of many colours.

I used to think that the gorgeous *dageraad* was named because it reminded someone of a lovely dawn at sea. One writer years ago declared that the

early Dutch fisherman who bestowed that name must have possessed a poetic imagination of no mean order. Alternatively he suggested that it might have been “a stray flash of oriental fancy not quite extinguished in the humble folk whom the countrymen of Van Riebeeck brought from the East as slaves”. Recently I heard a more reasonable but less romantic explanation. *Dageraad* is a corruption of the Portuguese word *dorado*, the fish that shines like gold. Cape fishermen do not use the word *dageraad* for dawn. They say *dagbreek* or *daglemier*.

Malay fishermen still refer to Devil’s Peak as Ghoeni Settang – Satan’s Head. A well-known rock off Clifton is called Baka (the cow), while a smaller rock close by is Baka se kind (the calf). But nearly all the offshore rocks and fishing banks have Afrikaans names nowadays, and not many of these appear on the chart. Hamersteen, Bobbejaansteen, Blinkklip, Potmanel, Pannekoek and Tamboersteen are well-known marks between Hout Bay and Table Bay; and there, too, you will find the Geldkis and the Horinkie. Now and again a rich fishing ground is named after the discoverer – Ou Daat se Kop, Damoen se Steen and Soekertjie se Steen.

My friend Smith was an authority on snoek. You never paid thirty shillings for a snoek in those days. Roads leading to Hout Bay were never jammed for miles by motorists eager to buy snoek at high prices. Coloured fishermen did not earn ten pounds a day hauling the snoek on board, swinging them under their arms, clubbing them and casting their lines again. But it was the same old dangerous, exhausting game.

Men are not often killed by snoek, but it has happened. I have traced a fatality in False Bay many years ago, when a fisherman was bitten in the foot by a snoek lying in the bottom of the boat. They could not stop the bleeding, they were a long way from harbour, and within four hours the man was dead. Medical research workers now believe that the snoek carries some anticlotting ferment in the secretions of the mouth.

Many tales are told of the great snoek shoals of the old days. I believe the greatest snoek invasion of Table Bay this century occurred in January, 1907, when the shoals were so enormous that the fish streamed in tightly-packed battalions right into the docks. They leapt greedily at any sort of bait, and so many were caught that the price went down to a

half-penny a snoek.

Is there a fish in the world that lends itself to more different cooking and preserving methods than the snoek? I place the simple fried snoek first, probably because of golden memories of the lines we trailed from Skipper Beauclerk Upington's cutter *Innisfallen*, catching our snoek and frying them almost at once. But you can grill it, boil it, curry it, smoke a snoek like salmon, or salt it, or serve a luscious pickle. Most of the traditional Cape snoek recipes deal with preserved snoek, as they were created long before refrigerators. Even a fresh snoek should be salted and peppered lightly some hours before cooking. This is the secret which ensures firm flesh. You can keep it safely in the refrigerator for days after this treatment.

Snoek biltong, a Saldanha Bay speciality, is salted and sundried. Brown farm bread and farm butter complete this dish. But in Cape Town you may find snoek biltong minced and mixed with cream cheese and served on buttered water biscuits at cocktail parties.

Cape Coloured people sometimes use snoek instead of mutton in tomato bredie. They stew and then

curry the heads and dry the roes. Snoek also appears in their homes as a fish sausage. Snoek pekelaar consists of slices of the fish placed in layers in jars of saltpetre, salt, sugar, coriander seeds and bay leaves. It will keep for months. I have an old Malay recipe in which raw snoek is covered with a paste of pounded coriander seeds, garlic and green chillies mixed with water to which salt and turmeric (borrie) has been added. After soaking in this mixture for half an hour the snoek is fried in hot oil. Serve with rice and slices of lemon.

Snoek livers, despised by many, are really excellent. Cookery books ignore this delicacy, but you should try it. Marinade in salt, pepper and lemon juice, then roll in breadcrumbs and fry in butter. Garnish with nutmeg and parsley and serve with mashed potatoes. The flavour resembles cooked oysters. You can also make a rich pate of snoek livers.

Cape housewives years ago declared that snoek was not worth eating unless (like oysters in England) there was an "r" in the month. It is a fact that the snoek are usually at their best in March and April, and that sometimes in May the worms appear. Snoek is one of the fish which must never be hung

up to dry in the moonlight, or it will become "pap". Such is the firm belief of fishermen and dealers; but I think it is the dew that spoils the snoek rather than the moon. However, "pap" snoek is something to be avoided. It seems to bring out rashes and cause headaches in some people.

Millions upon millions of snoek have gone inland to the farms of the Cape, but I think the most popular loads carried by the old *visryers* were harders. Do you remember the *visryers*? They used carts and horses, and in midsummer they bought bunches of harders (twenty-five in a bunch) and went from one farm to another selling them. The harders were *winddroog*; salted, but not heavily, and dried in the south-easter. For many years the price was about twenty shillings a hundred. Some dealers, however, were prepared to exchange their fish for moskonfyt, raisins or brandy.

Doppies were cheaper than harders. Grain farmers gave their labourers fish for breakfast at harvest time, and *doppies* or hottentot and silver fish (sold in bunches of ten) served the purpose very well. The farmer could hang the strings of *doppies* in his loft until the fish became as dry as biltong. Coffee, bread and dripping and dried fish made a good start

to the day's work.

It would be hard to find a *visryer* with cart and horses nowadays, for the motor-lorry drove him off the road a long time ago. He was welcomed on the farms not only because of the fish he brought, but as a link with the sea. Farmers love the coast, and this affection only becomes more intense the farther you travel into the hinterland. When a farmer saw the old *visryer* approaching he had a vision of icy seas and cool beaches and a break in the sweltering routine of summer on the farm ... and fresh harders.

Harders must be grilled and served with butter sauce and lemon. Frying ruins them. The harder is a mullet, of course, and this is one of the fish selected in the Cape for kippering. *Marsbanker* is another, and a *marsbanker* soaked in brine and cunningly smoked will stand comparison with Scotland's famous product.

Another fish that appears in great numbers is the elf. In spring and summer the Kalk Bay fishing boats catch them in vast numbers; though from a penny each they have gone in recent years to sixpence. Elf does not rank with the harder. Such authorities as Hildagonda Duckitt and Mrs Dijkman

ignored it. Possibly it is because they resemble mackerel in that they do not keep well. A fresh boiled elf, however, is not to be despised. "There are tunnies in the sea about the Cape, but not one was taken there, that I know of, during my stay," wrote the traveller Kolbe more than two centuries ago. "I have, at sea, seen them leap above water, but never was near enough to take any particular account of them."

I think the fishermen were afraid of these great, fighting fish, and saw no profit in catching them. Only in very recent years have they appeared in the fish shops. Tunny can be a tough fish if it is fried. Give it two hours in a casserole with wine and herbs, onion and butter, and you have a magnificent dish. Tunny also makes the finest cold fish salad in the world after Scotch salmon. Do not throw the livers away. Fry the tunny liver and serve with thick onion gravy.

Another aristocrat among the Cape fish is the *geelbek* or Cape salmon. It was a mistake, I think, to call this excellent whitefleshed fish "salmon". Though its shape is reminiscent of the true salmon, it has an entirely different flavour. Dr. Louis Leipoldt always said that *geelbek* was the only fish

suitable for a really superb dish of *ingelegde vis* (pickled fish curry). The *geelbek* has a quality of flakiness which is essential. Old-fashioned cooks never served the dish on the day it was made. It was given time to mature, and usually the *geelbek* was submerged in its pickle for a week before it was placed on the table. Packed in jars, it lasted for months.

You do not encounter a fish stew very often in the Cape, but the *geelbek* lends itself to this dish. *Geelbek*, sole, *galjoen*, mussels, oysters and pre-cooked *perlemoen* make a splendid stew with fish stock, red wine, herbs, crushed garlic, paprika and salt. Serve on fried crouton with some of the sauce poured over it. Decorate with parsley. This is not a cheap meal, remember.

Coloured fishermen look for large catches of *geelbek* from Boxing Day onwards. Gansbaai is a great place for them, and one of the redoubtable Van Dyks caught over one hundred *geelbek* with hook and line in two and a half hours some years ago. That catch brought him twenty-five pounds cash.

John Bickerdyke included the story of an epic battle

with a *geelbek* in his book on sea fishing. Professor James Cameron, who held the chair of classics at the South African College, was the angler, and he was using a rod on the quarterdeck of a man-o'-war anchored off Simonstown. The fish darted under the keel at one stage, but it was landed after a hard fight that lasted an hour. It weighed over twenty-six pounds. A forty-pounder, however, has been recorded.

Galjoen is at its best in the early summer, and like the harder it is a *braaivis*, a fish for grilling. Some people dislike galjoen, though I fail to see why a fish with such rich and strong character should be shunned because of its veins. It is a great fish for anglers along my beach, and those who land a nine-pounder go home rejoicing. In the South African Museum, however, there is a galjoen that weighed over fourteen pounds. You must have *karring-melkwater*, a disturbed sea coloured like buttermilk, to catch this fish. Even then half of them break away from the hook.

Old-fashioned professional fishermen at Gansbaai and other villages looked upon the galjoen as a fish to catch when the sea was too rough for the boats to go out. They fished with a fearsome rod known as a

hoekstok, a bamboo rod thirty feet in length and weighing up to thirty pounds. That was before reels were used, and they simply tied the line to the end of the rod. It was exhausting, but the galjoen they caught on those rods saved whole families from hunger.

Old Frikkie Stadler of Blaauwberg was one of the experienced fishermen who added to my stock of fish lore. Frikkie was the most energetic of three bachelor brothers, and he rode up and down the beach looking for the fish shoals. His boat was always ready for launching, with the trek-net heaped in the stern. He made record hauls in his day, and deserved them. No one has ever secured the same harvests from the bay since Frikkie Stadler passed on.

Often at sunrise I would go out yawning on to the stoep of the cottage that was too close to the sea, and find the Klein Baai beach littered with Frikkie's harders or white stumpnose. I had cheap fish in those days. Frikkie's record catch was made in March, 1923, when he netted one hundred and twenty thousand white stumpnose. That is three or four times the size of a good catch. The average weight of the fish was about two and a half pounds

and it made a glittering spectacle. Boats came from Woodstock to carry the fish away, as there was no road to Blaauwberg in those days. Frikkie Stadler got ninepence a hundred for his fish.

One of the queerest finds I ever made on Blaauwberg beach was a bale of raw rubber impaled by the sword of a swordfish. By sheer chance I solved the mystery some time later with the aid of a newspaper cutting. A ship loaded with crepe rubber was sunk by a Japanese submarine off the coast of East Africa during World War II, and for years afterwards the one hundred pound bales washed up on the South African coast. Mr. Peter van Rooyen, a Zululand sugar planter, salvaged hundreds of bales and sold them. (The government claimed twenty-five per cent of the amount received.) Some of the bales had been attacked by swordfish; the East London museum received one which had been pierced by three "swords", all broken. And one bale had drifted all the way round the southern tip of Africa to my beach.

Swordfish are indeed ferocious creatures, and they seem to go mad at the sight of harmless objects floating on the sea. Many a boat has been attacked by these giants. It is believed that the swordfish

mistakes boats and ships for whales, though it is possible that these head-on collisions are accidental. In the British Museum in London you can see a “sword” which pierced the hull of a ship with planking almost two feet thick. Yet this “spear” is not intended as a weapon; it is a form of streamlining. The fish can live without its “sword”, but cannot grow a new one.

Swordfish are extremely rare in South African waters. The first authentic specimen of a broadbill swordfish was brought into Table Bay Docks in July, 1956, by a trawler. It is regarded as the greatest of all sporting game fish. Another point to remember if you should come across this rarity is that the flesh is delicious.

Now and again the Cape fishermen bring in an ocean sunfish. Malays have a tradition that it is unlucky to harpoon these monsters, and they are of little use except to museums. Certain members of the sunfish group – the *blaasops* or puffers – are poisonous. Sunfish are non-poisonous, but tough and tasteless. Some of you may remember a ten-foot sunfish which Crellin, the pier master, captured in 1924 and exhibited on the Adderley Street pier. A rarity in South African waters is the weird

Alexandrine sunfish, which has only been identified on three occasions. A specimen weighing over eight hundred pounds was found on the rocks at Gansbaai about ten years ago.

I have mentioned the crawfish I caught from my dinghy at Blaauwberg; the crawfish I hope to catch again if I can make up my mind to buy an expensive fibre-glass boat. Dr. Cecil von Bonde, the former director of fisheries, once pointed out that to call the Cape crawfish a rock lobster was a misnomer, since the crawfish is totally different from the true lobster. I agree, and I shall go on calling it a crawfish in spite of the official policy.

True lobsters, little chaps with large claws on the first pair of walking legs, are found along the south Cape coast. They are great rarities. A specimen caught near Port Alfred in 1957, was the seventh example recorded in half a century.

That famous Cape statesman John X. Merriman was the pioneer of the crawfish export trade which has now become such an asset to South Africa. Eighty years ago Merriman and his partner, Charles Manuel, were awarded a bronze medal at the Philadelphia Exhibition for canned crawfish.

Fishermen at that time, and for long afterwards, regarded the crawfish as a nuisance. It cluttered up the nets, and there was no market for it worth mentioning. Some vegetable farmers used crawfish as manure. The price of a large boiled crawfish in Cape Town was a penny. So the crawfish, with a small loaf of bread costing a penny halfpenny, became almost the staple diet of the very poor.

How do you like your crawfish done? Crawfish mayonnaise seems to be the most common order, though it takes a good mayonnaise to bring out the delicate flavour. Crawfish cocktail, an expensive item at restaurants, is better. If you imagine that this form is a test of the chef's art I can disillusion you. Just chop up the crawfish meat and mix it with a blend of tomato sauce and mayonnaise in more or less equal parts, with a little lemon juice and a dash of tabasco if you happen to have it. It costs a few pence a portion and is equal to the crawfish cocktail served at six or seven shillings in the restaurants where I dine when in a stupid mood. You can improve on my basic recipe by using tomato ketchup instead of sauce and sour cream instead of mayonnaise. White wine may also be added. This sauce, with cheese, is all you need to bake a

crawfish thermidor.

I like hot crawfish, and among my early memories is the scalloped crawfish my mother made. She left me the recipe. Take a cup of minced crawfish, two tablespoons of cream, half a cup of breadcrumbs soaked in milk, one beaten egg, three tablespoons of melted butter, one teaspoon of vinegar, salt and pepper. Mix well and bake light brown in a fireproof dish with breadcrumbs, grated cheese and butter on top.

Among the best parts of a crawfish is the red "coral" in the head. You must clean out the main intestine, like a dark cord, and any green substance where head and body meet. Crawfish legs contain tender and delicate meat, but you have to work hard for a small reward. Crawfish roe gives a marvellous colour to fish paste and improves the spreading quality.

Crawfish soup is very good indeed. Other forms worth considering are crawfish legs and asparagus with mayonnaise; crawfish with a rich cream sauce (including sherry) served with rice; devilled crawfish tails; crawfish *vol-au-vent* with cardinal sauce; curried crawfish served in the shells with

chopped green peppers and fried bananas on top; and avocados stuffed with crawfish. You can also have potted crawfish, minced with mace and cayenne pepper.

Prawns and shrimps usually reach my table from expensive imported packets supplied by deep-freeze firms. I have heard of shrimps being netted in False Bay and some of the river estuaries yield good catches. Durban bay is a large source of supply, St. Lucia Bay is the home of giant prawns up to nine inches in length, and the Delagoa Bay prawns are famous.

When I spent a week in a trawler off the Cape years ago I feasted on the huge crabs that came up in the net. They really ought to bring these huge spider crabs in and sell them. I have had fine crab dishes at the Wilderness and Knysna, but if you want crab in Cape Town you must buy it in a tin.

If there is one fish more than another that you would reject immediately your fishmonger offered it, that fish is the dogfish. It is a small shark, of course, an ugly, mottled, blotched creature. I would ask you not to go by its appearance, for the dogfish is good food. Restaurants know this, and you have

probably eaten dogfish many a time without knowing it. Dr. Barnard was dining one night in a leading Cape Town restaurant when he identified the fish course as dogfish by the peculiar bone structure. Everyone seemed to be enjoying it. The fancy name on the menu had done the trick.

Now that I have converted you to dogfish, how about some redbait? This humble sea-squirt is not good company when old, and many an angler's wife has had reason to complain bitterly of the lingering aroma. Fresh red-bait, however, can be used as an ingredient in fish soup. *Perlemoen*, garlic and onions go into the pressure cooker with the clean red-bait. Add a few rashers of bacon and two ounces of butter. As a final touch, drop some clean boiled mussels and a glass of sherry into the soup before serving.

Smoked eels are imported into South Africa at a high price as the local eels are seldom obtainable. Dr. Louis Leipoldt once told me that in his youth the White House Hotel in Strand Street, Cape Town, served wonderful eel pancakes. Eels must have been more plentiful in those days, for Mrs Dijkman's cookery book tells you how to fry, boil or stew an eel; and her eel pie sounds like a

masterpiece. No wonder there are always people waiting hungrily when the Hermanus lagoon is drained. That is one place where you can pick up a stranded eel.

Table Bay was famous among early voyagers as a place for stocking their ships with fish. “Wee went and tooke within twoe howers as much as bath the ships could eate in a daye,” wrote one navigator. “And at the river’s mouth at our comeinge away where wee watered wee took 3,500 mullets which served us well in our voyage.” Another Englishman, writing forty years before Van Riebeeck’s arrival, declared: “The aboundance of water, cattell, fowle and fishe, and every other good thinge for refreshinge, hath given us hope it may be inhabited by our people.” However, the Dutch already had their eyes on the Cape, and it was clear that the wealth of fish played some part in the final decision.

Cape Town has never done justice to its fish in the naming of streets and other public places. My 1865 directory shows a few lanes named Klipfish and Crab, Oyster and Mossel. Nowhere is there a Snoek Square. It is almost as though the city is ashamed of the fish that have fed its people for so long.

Stompneus Bay, Roman Rock, Steenbras River and Rogge Bay all honour various species of fish. I would like to see the local fish names brought into the heart of the city and given the fame they deserve.

Chapter 11

LIKE THE MISTS OF TIME

*I wiped away the weeds and foam,
I fetched my sea-born treasures home;
But the poor, unsightly, noisome things
Had left their beauty on the shore,
With the sun and the sand and the wild uproar.*

Emerson.

SHELL-COLLECTORS COME to my beach sometimes, but I am sure they make better hauls elsewhere. I met one who showed me his treasures and described them with enthusiasm and a touch of poetry. "Soft colours like the mists of time," was a phrase he used. No wonder there are almost as many shell collectors today as there are stamp-collectors.

Of course there is very little money in shell-collecting. It gives you beauty and interest and sea air, but the hoard of a lifetime may have scientific value only. Some of the conical volutes are rare enough to fetch ten pounds apiece. However, their homes are in deep water and you are most likely to find them in the stomachs of fishes.

"It is perhaps a more fortunate destiny to have a taste for collecting shells than to be born a

millionaire," remarked Robert Louis Stevenson. The shell-collector I met made me feel the charm and beauty of these gifts of the sea; heavy, pear-shaped chank shells with spires which are carved and set with jewels and used as lamps in eastern temples; orange-coloured turban shells that serve as cups; pearly nautilus, the cowries, tritons and slipper limpets, violet foam shells, brown chitons, the gorgeous Venus ear-shell, the dove-shells and mitre-shells, harp-shells and whelks.

South Africa has great wealth of shellfish, and more than four thousand species have been named. Mr. H. J. Koch, veteran collector in the Cape and discoverer of new species, has pointed out that this is due to the warm Mozambique current bringing in tropical forms, while other species flourish in the cold Benguella current of the west coast.

Some of Nature's masterpieces of beauty are to be found in the shell kingdom. So tiny are the smallest shells that they can be found only by sifting the sand through mosquito netting. One hundred shells of these species, trophons and turritellas and the *Alvania minutissima*, may just fill a teaspoon. And the largest shellfish in the world is believed to exist on the Zululand coast. This is the giant clam,

weighing up to five hundred pounds (what a chowder!) and supporting its huge flesh on seaweed. It lives as long, possibly, as the tortoise or elephant. Pity the doomed diver who finds these gaping jaws closing on a limb. And that has happened. The giant clam has been identified in Portuguese East African waters only sixty miles from the Union, so there cannot be much doubt that it is also a South African shellfish.

Natives use giant clams as cradles and baths for their babies, and as tanks for storing rainwater. This great bivalve mollusc has one enemy, the octopus. If you regard the octopus as a low form of life, please remember that it has enough intelligence to pick up a stone from the sea-floor and place it swiftly between the valves of the giant clam. After that the octopus (itself a death-trap) can tear out the meat without fear of being trapped.

One of the finest collections of South African shells is now in the Oxford University museum. It was made between the years 1902 and 1931 at Port Alfred by the late Lieut.-Col. W. H. Turton, D.S.O., an engineer officer who developed his hobby to the point where he ranked as an expert. Turton had once been stationed on St. Helena. Shells that had

drifted on seaweed across the South Atlantic to the island fascinated him, and he was delighted to find them again at home on the Port Alfred rocks. He had suspected their African origin, for they were entirely different from the St. Helena shells.

Shells are abundant at Port Alfred, and Turton identified more than fifteen hundred species and varieties during his years there. (A London shell dealer had informed him that he would be lucky if he found four hundred species in one place, for that was the world's record.) Turton employed a secretary and several natives, and rewarded other natives who brought him shells. He travelled by ox-wagon and often lived in a tent near the beach he was searching. All his collecting was restricted to the beaches within ten miles of Port Alfred, so that many noteworthy species of South African shells do not appear in his collection. In his own favourite area, however, he could not have missed much.

Among his discoveries was a portion of a ship's mast which washed up near Kowie Point. It was encrusted with shells of many species, and Turton spent a fortnight examining them. Some beautiful scallops and curious pholas came off that mast. Chitons were taken among the rocks by the natives.

Turton said there were too many sharks in the chiton area for his liking. The most plentiful shells were the marginellas, small and often with very delicate colouring. Limpets and pear or chank shells came next in abundance. Turton's magnificent collection was displayed in 1925 at the Wembley Exhibition.

Jeffrey's Bay (where Captain Jeffrey the trader opened a store early last century) is another generous beach for the shell collector. Conchologists from many lands have searched this shore. Residents make collections worthy of museums. One wealthy American spent a full year at Jeffrey's Bay because he was sure it would yield some rarity. And at last it did, a little horn-shaped shell which had thrown up its coil in the opposite direction to the rest of its species. You might examine a million shells before coming upon such a freak.

I said there was no money in shell-collecting, but Jeffrey's Bay has yielded a fortune in shell-grit for poultry. And in the days when the doily was more popular than it is now, doily makers paid sixpence a hundred for the tiny shells from Jeffrey's Bay that adorned the fabric.

Pansy Beach at Mossel Bay gained its name from the pansy shell which has been found there. It is regarded as a rarity, but many of them have been picked up along that coast. Incidentally this delicate white object is not a mollusc, but the skeleton of a sea-urchin.

Mrs D. J. de Villiers of Robertson, a leading shell-collector, found most of her specimens round about Agulhas and on the long Struys Bay beach. As a young woman she often walked fifteen miles a day in search of shells. For thirty years friends contributed to the collection. Mrs de Villiers added many rarities when she bought a good range of large shells from a Hermanus school principal. Black shells are rare, and Mrs de Villiers was once dismayed when she discovered that a black shell was missing. But it was not lost. Sometime later she found it in the roof, where a bird had hidden it.

I believe that Mrs Helen Boswell of Pretoria has the largest private shell collection in the Union, while the second largest is contained in the private shell museum opened in 1956 by Mr. D. W. J. Ackermann at the Strand. Mr. Ackermann once picked up a shell and raised his arm to throw it into the sea. Then he looked at it, put it in his pocket and

became a collector. He displays shells in many forms, including shell ornaments and pictures made from the coloured fragments of shells.

Mr. Ackermann's ten thousand shells are not all South African, for he exchanges specimens with other collectors in many parts of the world. You can see the shells of Tristan da Cunha in his showcases. Trawler men have sent him many shells from the floor of the ocean.

Oysters head the list of romantic shellfish because of their pearls and the luxurious food they yield. Mossel Bay is the oyster stronghold. Along that coast, all the way to Knysna, grow millions of oysters which are collected by whole families of "stickers" during the open season. South Africa's edible oysters belong to the *ostrea* species, but they are so rugged, and of so many shapes and sizes that the scientist often finds it hard to classify them. They have to adapt themselves to stormy conditions, clinging to every crevice in the rocks. Seldom are they found on flat terraces, like the English and American oysters. For that reason there is no oyster-dredging in South African waters. Oysters must be gathered by hand.

Three days before and three days after new moon and full moon are the periods when the greatest oyster harvests are gathered, for then the sea uncovers huge oyster beds. An expert "sticker" can lever off six hundred oysters in one hard day's work. He uses a steel bar, with a point at one end for long oysters shaped like a man's hand, and a chisel at the other end for broad, flat oysters. And he has to watch the surf. Many a man has been swept away to his death because he concentrated on his work and forgot the merciless sea.

Years ago I went down to the rocks at Mossel Bay with Mr. P. Bardin, a man who bought and sold oysters for decades. He had a rock pool which sometimes held forty thousand oysters. Bardin was paying five shillings a hundred in those happy days, and oysters were three shillings a dozen in the Cape Town restaurants. His largest order was for a batch of three thousand during the visit to Cape Town of the present Duke of Windsor. No oyster smaller than a saucer appeared on the table at that banquet.

"I am out in all weathers, day and night, watching this pool," Bardin told me. "In rough weather the sea breaks in and washes dozens of them away. As you see, I keep some in sacks ready for delivery,

and many more loose. Oysters get thirsty; you have to put them in water at least once every twenty-four hours, or they lose their moisture and die. Boy! Give that bag of oysters a drink. Some dealers feed their stocks of oysters on porridge, but I believe that is a mistake. Let them have plenty of seawater, and they flourish in this pool for months.”

Oysters, it seems, will not keep their mouths shut. They lie foolishly out of the water with gaping jaws, a breeze springs up, and before they realise what has happened they are dry – and dead. Or a grain of sand drifts into the shell and kills the oyster as surely as appendicitis kills human beings.

So the oyster merchant must examine every oyster before sending it away from Mossel Bay by rail or steamer. His skilled eye can pick out most of the dead ones easily enough. They lie in the pool with their mouths open and do not snap shut when you touch them, as live oysters do. Another useful test is to tap a suspected oyster against a rock. Dead ones give out a hollow sound. Properly treated, however, a bag of oysters will keep in good condition during a long journey. It is merely necessary to stow them away from heat and dust, and turn a hose on them once a day. After all, the oyster shell is as air-tight

as a tin of bully beef while the oyster keeps its mouth shut.

Simon van der Stel and other epicures of the Dutch East India Company were among the first white men at the Cape to eat oysters. Governor Louis van Assenburgh granted land at Vishoek (the present Gordon’s Bay) to the widow of Gerrit Cloete on condition that she sent him two hundred oysters and six soles during the first six months of her occupation. Both oysters and soles are still to be found at Gordon’s Bay, but the men who know where to find them guard their secrets.

Oysters still exist in Table Bay, though in small quantities. Dr. Sparrman, the Swedish scientist who visited the Cape in the eighteenth century, noted: “A small kind of oyster is likewise found in a particular spot in the bay and is kept by the Governor for his own table.” Mentzel reported oysters at Fish Hoek, also “intended for the Governor’s table”. Only the broken ones reached the palates of the common people.

Many attempts have been made to cultivate oysters in Table Bay and Saldanha Bay, all without success. Thousands of oysters brought from Massel Bay, and

even from England and France, perished in Cape waters. They were killed by crabs, starfish and boring whelks; by shifting sands, mud, and exposure to wind at low tide. Cultivation of oysters in the Knysna lagoon, however, has been successful.

When you eat an oyster you taste the very essence of the sea. I have seen men enjoying this rich, velvet food far from the South African coast; as far as Elisabethville in the Belgian Congo, where fresh oysters cost a fortune. South African oysters, especially the Mossel Bay oysters, are in no way inferior to the Whitstables of England and Blue Points of the United States.

Fresh oysters carry their own sauce, the liquor within their shells. Salt, pepper, vinegar, lemon, red pepper; these condiments kill an oyster. Epicures assert that you should not even use a fork when eating an oyster, as the metallic flavour is too strong. Eat your oyster as the Walrus and the Carpenter ate them, straight from the shell. And pour scorn on anyone who declares that you cannot chew an oyster. You must chew it. That is the only way of enjoying the flavour.

Few complaints would be heard about the noble oyster if people would remember that a dozen, taken with brown bread and butter, are almost a meal. Heavy meat courses afterwards may result in indigestion, and the innocent oyster is blamed. You must remember that a large oyster contains as much food value as a glass of milk.

Over the front door of the old De Hoop homestead in the Bredasdorp district there is an oyster shell set into the wall. Long ago the farm was owned by a branch of the Cloete family, and a Mrs Cloete died after eating too many oysters. The shell was placed there as a warning by her husband. I know that Percy Chapman, skipper of the 1926-27 M.C.C. team, ate sixteen dozen Mossel Bay oysters in Cape Town one night, and survived. Such feats are not to be attempted by ordinary men.

Forget all the nonsense about the letter “r” in the month when eating South African oysters. They are protected by law for six months of the year, but they are wholesome at all times when the sea itself is free from the “red water” phenomenon which I shall describe later.

You cannot eat oysters without thinking of pearls,

and pearls have been found in South African oysters. A fine business, the gathering of these gifts from the dripping hand of the sea! Pink pearls, perfectly round, are the best, and white come next. A black pearl is valuable if the shape is good. Baroque pearls, huge and irregular, and seed pearls come last on the list.

I asked Bardin whether he had ever found a pearl. "Yes, plenty of seed pearls, worth very little," he replied." But along the coast near here a man once found a small white pearl – he showed it to me – and sold it for forty pounds."

The chances of finding beds of pearl-bearing oysters in South African waters have not been overlooked. The coasts of the Caledon, Bredasdorp and Swellendam districts were once explored by syndicates, almost without result. Pearl oysters containing pearls the size of peas have been found on the Kowie coast; but never in sufficient numbers to encourage a new industry.

South African pearls are usually too small to be of any use. One found at Humewood, and bought by the Port Elizabeth Museum, was an exception, for it was valued at one hundred pounds. Pearls are

seldom found in Natal waters. A little pearl found at Amanzimtoti in 1923 was shown to the principal fisheries officer, and he stated that it was the first Natal pearl he had ever seen. It was valued at three pounds. A woman collected twenty pearls from oysters on the False Bay coast shortly before World War II. Jewellers rejected them, however, because they were too small and discoloured. Whitesands, at the Breede River mouth, also has beds of pearl oysters, but pearls of the right size, colour and shape have not yet been discovered.

Bardin always hoped to start a cultured pearl industry at Mossel Bay. "It means boats and divers – but what the Japanese have done we can do," he told me. The idea is to insert a bead of mother-of-pearl between the mantle and the shell of a mature oyster. In time a pearl-like body appears; not a real pearl, but very like one. Bardin never achieved his ambition.

Scallops, those lovely relatives of the oyster, with flesh almost as tasty, are found in Cape waters. Their shells, like brilliant fans, are imitated by human sculptors and jewellers, and used by chefs for baking such glorious fish dishes as *Coquilles St. Jacques* with piped potatoes and sliced mushrooms.

Unfortunately the scallop is not easily located, though frogmen and others know that it lives in False Bay and Mossel Bay. You can watch the scallops flying like birds in an aquarium tank, using their golden shells as wings. Put a starfish among them and you will realise that even a mollusc can reveal its feelings of terror.

South Africans are compensated for the scarcity of scallops by an abundance of *perlemoen*. This is the abalone of America and the *ormer* of the Channel Islands. They grow up to nine inches, and one of that size makes a rich meal indeed. Nowadays anyone can gather five *perlemoen* a day for his own use without a permit, and that is a liberal ration.

Between the years 1949 and 1954 it looked as though the *perlemoen* might be wiped out. Divers were fetching them up by the hundred thousand round the Cape coasts. At the height of the boom some of the most experienced divers were making as much as £80 a day, and making it day after day. The *perlemoen* were being canned and sent to the East to restore the failing virility of wealthy Orientals. If they had indeed contained any such magic power the species would have been doomed. However, the factories closed one by one, due to

south-easters, shortage of divers and technical difficulties rather than American competition and marketing problems. We who eat the *perlemoen* for its superb flavour are thankful.

Only when the ugly-looking raw flesh has been removed do you see the inner beauty of the *perlemoen*, the shell that is used as a pearl substitute. Yet that flesh is among the greatest delicacies of the sea when you know how to prepare it. First clean your *perlemoen*, and this messy process is best carried out on the rocks. Use a scrubbing brush to remove the green slime. If you press your thumb under the flesh at the pointed end of the shellfish and push hard, the flesh will come out in one piece, clean as a whistle. All the flesh is edible, but the sac and fringe are usually cut away and the white part used. I know a farmer in the Bot River district who gathers his *perlemoen* at Onrust (where they flourish) and places them in vinegar water for fifteen minutes. The slime then brushes off easily. Others use wood ash from the stove mixed with water, but this takes longer.

David, my young coloured cook at the Blaauwberg cottage years ago, was a master of the art of rendering the *perlemoen* tender. Some people beat

the meat with a wooden mallet. My adviser, the late Dr. Louis Leipoldt, permitted this method, though something of the flavour is lost. When the texture of the meat resembles raw beefsteak, dry it carefully in a cloth and then cut into small cubes. Place it in a pot with butter, a blade of mace, crushed rosemary leaves, a pinch of green ginger, cayenne or white pepper. Cover the pot and simmer until the *perlemoen* is tender as marrow. This will take about fifteen minutes. Remove the *perlemoen*, Make a sauce by stirring in a glass of sherry, a cup of cream and a few drops of tabasco, and pour this over the *perlemoen*. Use neither salt nor water, or the *perlemoen* will become tough and indigestible. Grate a little nutmeg over the dish before serving. Only then may the salt be added. That was Dr. Leipoldt's favourite recipe. You can use cloves, if preferred, instead of the rosemary and green ginger.

Mr. L. P. Johnston, a frogman who collected *perlemoen* for the Sea Point aquarium, gave me another proved recipe. Put four beaten whole *perlemoen* steaks into a saucepan with a pound of butter, add milk to cover if necessary, and simmer gently for forty minutes or until tender. Take out the *perlemoen* and add breadcrumbs for thickening,

white wine, lemon juice and nutmeg. Put the *perlemoen* back and simmer for a few minutes.

French chefs flour and fry their *ormer* steaks in butter, pour a brown sauce over them, add parsley and bay leaf and stew gently for four hours. No doubt this produces the most tender dish of all. It is a problem which some people solve by putting the *perlemoen* through the mincer. Anything is better than indigestion. You must avoid sweet wine and other sugary items when eating *perlemoen*, for they form an unhappy blend.

Four legal members of the De Villiers family once sat down to a meal of *perlemoen* cooked at Onrust by a farmer's wife. They were asked to describe the flavour, and gave their verdict – it tasted like ox-marrow, and was every bit as tender.

The *perlemoen* secretes pearls, and (unlike the oyster) these pearls are found embedded in the flesh. Many a pearl has been swallowed without ill effects. One diver working at Three Anchor Bay found five pearls in one *perlemoen*. The cold waters of the South Atlantic seem to produce the pearls, as pearls are rare in the *perlemoen* from the coasts washed by the Indian Ocean. *Perlemoen* shells,

lined gorgeously with mother-of-pearl, make handsome ashtrays. They are also used as pots for growing violets.

Some people eat the *klipkous*, a small *perlemoen*. The true epicure, however, sticks to the *perlemoen*, for the *klipkous* is as tough as a boot and few people seem to be successful in making it tender.

Another large shellfish which is often eaten at the Cape is the *alikuikel* or *arikruikel*, a sort of giant periwinkle found in huge quantities. Coloured people carry away sackfuls from Miller's Point beyond Simonstown at low spring tide. Here again you have to know the tricks of the trade, or your periwinkle will be incredibly tough. My old friend and beachcomber, the late Mr. A. A. Jurgens of stamp-collecting fame, beat his periwinkles with a round stone, minced them finely and simmered them in a saucepan with water for five hours. After that he added crushed biscuit made with white flour, butter, nutmeg, salt and pepper, and simmered again until the gravy thickened.

A fisherman who used to spend his week-ends at Buffels Bay told me that he always filled a paraffin tin with fresh water, dropped in the *alikuikels*, and

allowed them to boil all day long. In the evening they almost fell out of their shells. Some people use sea water for the boiling. You can brown the flesh in butter with onions and diced potatoes, then stew with water for two hours and serve with rice. The flesh can be curried. Small *alikuikels* may simply be rolled in flour and fried in butter. Always cut off the black portion of the *alikuikel*, the part found deep in the shell, or the food will have a bitter flavour.

Riversdale farmers make *alikuikel* biltong. They boil the flesh in the shell, or break the shell and remove the flesh. Then the hard disc and the black part behind the foot are removed, and the foot is salted and dried in the sun. It shrinks to one-fifth of the normal size during the process. Finally the *alikuikel* is put on a string like beads. To prepare dried *alikuikel* for the table, soak overnight in fresh water, mince or beat and serve as a stew or curry. It has been said that South Africa has no national soup like the *bouillabaisse* of France or *minestrone* of Italy. Well, after full consideration I suggest *alikuikel-sop*. Break the shells, clean, wash and beat the meat, and simmer with water. After two hours separate the liquid from the meat and put the

liquid on the stove again. Add thickening and a pinch of salt. Dr. A. D. Luckhoff of Stellenbosch, an authority of South African sea foods, regards this soup as superior to turtle, with an aroma and taste which give the consumer the treat of a lifetime.

Limpets, the *perdevoetjies* of the fishermen, make a good, safe dish provided you clean them properly. They have ribbon-like tongues covered with sharp teeth like hooks; and a mass of this material may lacerate your stomach. Run a sharp knife round the edge of the shell to remove this menace. True lovers of the limpet eat it raw, or dressed with vinegar, salt and pepper. They are rich in vitamins and contain a fair amount of phosphorus. Dr. Leipoldt used to make a limpet soup with the limpet crushed in its shell, sliced onions, garlic, green seaweed and pepper corns. After simmering for two hours he would strain this carefully, add sherry and serve.

Sea-eggs or sea-urchins, all of one species, may be picked up by the hundred on the Cape beaches. Fishermen have always eaten them, and nowadays the Italians of Cape Town may be seen collecting these spiky delicacies. They call them *ricci*. And I have seen tins of sea-urchins bearing Chinese labels which I could not read.

This is a primitive form of sea life, with a hard, unpleasant covering. Cut the shell in half with a sharp knife. The only edible portion is under the apex of the shell, a yellow substance which will just fill your spoon. (Sea-urchins grow as large as Elgin apples, but you will need a diving outfit to reach them.) Thus you must work hard to gather enough for a meal. Indeed, you will need fifty to make a proper fish course for one person.

Beche-de-mer, *trepang* or sea cucumber, a relative of the sea-urchin, is found on the Natal coast. It is small compared with the Australian species, but none the less edible. Split them open, gut them, dry them in the sun; then smoke them for twenty hours. They resemble burnt sausages by this time, but the Chinese ask for nothing better as hors d'oeuvres.

On the west coast of the Cape, and certainly on the rocks of my beach, the black mussel is so abundant that whole clans of *Strandlopers* once lived on them. This is a true mussel. Some are six inches in length, and after north-west gales their shells are flung on shore by the million.

Lime-burning, one of the oldest industries in the Cape, depends on the black mussel. A really

fantastic use was found for these shells during World War II, when large quantities were gathered at Blaauwberg and shipped to the Belgian Congo. The demand arose when the Congo rubber producers could no longer import tins to collect the latex from the trees. Some enterprising business man came to the Union to see whether he could find a substitute. The huge black mussels of Blaauwberg solved the problem until the end of the war.

Pink mussel pearls are fairly common and some women own strings of pink and green varieties. Nearly always they are misshapen. Valuable black pearls are sometimes formed in mussels, and it would be interesting to know how many black pearls have been flung into the limekilns of the Cape during the past three centuries.

Black mussels have no harmful parts. The beard is usually removed for no more serious reason than that it may stick between the teeth. You can eat a dozen raw mussels straight from the sea. Let me recommend the Blaauwberg mussels. They have the finest flavour, and are remote from sewers, whereas the Sea Point waterfront is too close to civilisation.

I once watched a party of Belgians cooking mussels

in my Blaauwberg cottage, noting every detail. That was lucky, for the mussels were the best I had ever tasted. Here is the secret. Select mussels of any size, from below the waterline, but not from stagnant pools. Scrape well and take the seaweed out of their mouths. Wash five or six times and then leave them to soak in salt water for thirty minutes so that they will eject any sand they have retained.

Cut two large onions and a bunch of celery to shreds. Place this in a large saucepan with a quarter of a pound of butter and cook until slightly brown. Add a teaspoon of pepper and a teaspoon of salt. Cover your onion-celery sauce with cold water and place the mussels in the saucepan. You must not fill it to the brim with mussels as the pan has to be shaken from time to time to allow every mussel to reach the sauce. Steam the mussels for twenty minutes and add parsley to the sauce before serving. The only way to tell when the mussels are done is by tasting them.

White mussels do not need “bearding”, but they absorb the sand they live in and only the expert can remove this grit. Some of the Blaauwberg people keep mussels for weeks pickled in vinegar.

Now I have a grim warning which you must heed. Never eat any sort of shellfish if you notice streaks of red in the sea by day, or vivid reddish or blue-green phosphorescent effects at night. This “red water” phenomenon is caused by a microscopic organism named *Gonyaulax catanella*. Black and white mussels feed on it without ill-effects, yet they store up a poison which is fatal to some human beings and animals. It is a fact that certain people can eat the poisoned mussels without a twinge of illness, but you will not wish to put your immunity to the test. Fish seem to be affected by the poison and become flabby but not poisonous.

Apparently “red water” usually appears in late autumn or early winter. No scientific records are available, however, as the discovery of *Gonyaulax* poison was only made in recent years. Many fishermen refuse to collect mussels at full moon, but this is pure superstition. Yet the fisherman’s belief that phosphorescent water is harmful has a basis of fact.

I have mentioned the *Strandlopers* whose kitchen middens litter every stretch of coastline in the Cape. They were the beachcombers who lived thousands of years before my time, and who roamed the Cape

beaches long after Van Riebeeck arrived. They ate mussels and all shellfish on a colossal scale, but their refuse heaps are instructive for other reasons.

Among the dunes near the Langebaan lagoon is an old spring called Blombos, an old meeting-place of the *Strandloper* clans. Here in the sand Dr. Louis Peringuey unearthed not only shellfish but cores and scrapers and borers and other relics of primitive man. He found brass buttons and pieces of oriental china washed up from Dutch ships sunk in Saldanha Bay. And most fascinating of all, he identified the bones of elephant and rhino, hippo, whale and seal, the lion and leopard and the smaller cats, antelope that have long vanished from that veld, and parts of an extinct buffalo.

Human skeletons are often found under the shells. Among the blackened stones of the middens you can reconstruct the way of life of these Stone Age people. Here are their flakes and bored stones, their bone arrowheads and the wing bones of seabirds which they used as needles. They cut the flesh from large shellfish with bone knives. Their women strung the black and white nerite shells for necklaces. So many shells did generation after generation of *Strandlopers* leave that farmers were

still carting away “shell guano” in recent years for use as fertilizer. Search the beach caves and the ancient heaps of shells and you may solve the mysteries of the past.

Chapter 12

NEPTUNE'S GARDEN

EVERY WALK on my beach takes me close to Neptune's garden, that long ocean fringe where the seaweeds grow. After a gale, stalks of the *seetrompet* or *seebamboes* are thrown ashore from the dark kelp forests. Low tide exposes daintier growths. Here in the shallows and on the moist rocks and sand live the ancestors of the botanical wonders of dry earth. Neptune's garden, the scientists say, was the cradle of all plant life. If I had walked on Blaauwberg beach a century ago, no one could have told me very much about Neptune's garden. Malays were making seaweed jelly, using the knowledge the old slave cooks brought from the East with them. I am sure the horses, cows and sheep were browsing on the sands and munching their favourite seaweeds then as they do now. You might also have seen your grandmother or great-aunt collecting delicate seaweeds for drying and pressing and mounting in those Victorian albums which are preserved in some old homes and country museums. I studied one at Tulbagh, an album filled with wreaths and scrolls and other patterns. Heart-shaped designs were popular, for then a verse of

sentimental poetry could be inscribed within the frame, in writing finer than any taught in modern schools.

Such were the old uses of seaweed, but the science that rules Neptune's garden came later. Philip Henry Gosse was the pioneer in this field in Britain. No one appears to have bothered about the South African seaweeds until Dr. C. F. Juritz, the government analyst, and Dr. E. A. Nobbs investigated certain growths early this century.

Nobbs declared that seaweed was superior to stable manure as a fertilizer. Juritz drew up a scheme for building kilns along the Cape west coast so that that seaweed could be reduced to ash and used by poor farmers. Nothing came of it. However, some coastal farmers have been enriching their sandy soil with kelp and other brown seaweeds for centuries. Tough, dry stems of *seebamboes* are usually first reduced to ashes, but fresh seaweed is added to the compost heap or dug in as green manure. Such fertilizers would be more widely used but for the cost of transport. Neptune's garden is protected nowadays. It is the home of fish and crawfish which would seek other haunts if their kelp forests were torn up by the greedy hands of man. You may not

even carry away a load of loose seaweed, gathered between high water mark and low, without a permit. The sea bed, all the way out to the three mile limit, is the property of the Governor-General.

I believe the commercial seaweed pioneer at the Cape was a sweet manufacturer who realised that agar-agar could be produced from the local red “sea string”, known to science as *Gracilaria confervoides*. Agar-agar, of course, is the gelatine used in sweet making and bacteriology. It holds meat and fish together in tins, cushioning the food and also serving as a palatable jelly. Agar-agar has the happy knack of absorbing body moisture while satisfying the appetite, so that it plays a great part in slimming diets.

Japan held an almost world-wide monopoly of agar-agar before World War II. There was a reason for this monopoly. Japan feeds its immense population with difficulty, and long ago the Japanese turned to the sea for seaweed foods. They secured nourishment and health at the same time; for seaweed contains iodine, which stimulates the thyroid gland and prevents goitre. So goitre is almost unknown in Japan and China. Seaweed is also believed to prevent hay fever (rare in the Far

East) and to preserve the teeth. Japan learnt how to prepare seaweed, and kept the secret.

Thus it was only when World War II found South Africa short of agar-agar that scientists began to study the supplies and qualities of the local seaweeds. Among those who played leading parts in the search were Professor W. E. Isaac and Miss Edith L. Stephens of the University of Cape Town botanical department and Dr. F. W. Fox of the South African Institute for Medical Research. Nearly three hundred varieties of seaweed are found along the Union’s coastline. Miss Stephens tested about fifty varieties in her own kitchen, burning so many saucepans that she nearly lost her cook.

One of the finest agar-producing seaweeds is the rare *Gelidium corneum*, recorded years ago on the South African coast; but this could not be located. However, the Langebaan lagoon yielded the dark red “sea string”, which I have mentioned, by the ton. I have seen the meadows of this weed beneath the tranquil water, and walked over heaps of it washed up on the lonely beaches between Church Haven and the whaling stations. “Sea string” is very similar to the Japanese seaweed from which agar-agar is produced. It is washed in fresh water and

boiled for three hours. After straining, the clear solution sets like a jelly. About one ton of agar-agar is recovered from ten tons of seaweed.

Medical demands came first. Agar-agar provides the firm jelly on which bacteria or fungi can grow, and it is also used in surgical dressings. Later on it became possible to supply agar-agar to ice-cream and jam manufacturers and bakers. Wine merchants and brewers use it for clarifying their vats. Many custard powders, salad dressings and tooth-pastes contain seaweed derivatives. Canned soups are thickened with agar-agar. In another form, agar-agar becomes a useful laxative. Before the end of World War II, practically every South African firm using agar-agar could draw on supplies within the Union.

So everyone has eaten seaweed, usually without knowing it. Yet the only dish known to most Cape housewives (even though they have never prepared it) is the seaweed jelly that I noted earlier. If you examine the common kelp called *Ecklonia buccinalis* – the sort which has provided so many fish horns – you will find a parasite seaweed clinging to it. The parasite, *Suhria vittata*, resembles a bunch of red ribbons, bleached white after exposure to the

sun. This is the basis of the jelly. It may be fresh and soft or dry and brittle. Fresh “red ribbons” make a jelly with the true sea flavour.

Miss Stephens has given me the recipe used for many years by the steward of the Cape Natural History Club. Take a quantity of the seaweed equal in size to a tennis ball when squeezed. Wash and boil to a pulp in three to four pints of water. After boiling allow the fumes to evaporate. Strain the liquid through cloth and add sugar, lemon or orange juice, brandy or sherry, all to taste. One cup of sugar to a pint is usually enough. Pour into small containers to set. If a large mould is used the jelly may liquefy when cut and left. More elaborate flavouring may be achieved by adding cloves, cinnamon and lemon peel to the boiling seaweed. These should be put into a muslin bag and removed after boiling for fifteen minutes. Mrs Harold Gribble of Paarl advises ginger or port wine as flavourings. She assured me that the jelly had proved of great value in the treatment of tuberculosis.

Another interesting old recipe is to be found in Mrs A. G. Hewitt’s pioneer book on Cape cookery. She soaked her seaweed all night in fresh water. Then

she put a quarter of a pound of seaweed into a saucepan with six pints of water and boiled for one hour. Next she made a custard of five cups of milk, five dessert spoons of sugar and ten eggs, flavoured with vanilla. Finally she added two cups of strained jelly, stirred the mixture until dissolved and poured into moulds.

Seaweed jelly gives bulk to diet without causing irritation. It is a valuable invalid food. The recipe Miss Stephens recommends was the dish often enjoyed by a Cape Town centenarian.

“Red ribbons” is akin to the seaweed known in Scotland as dulse. (“He who eats of the dulse of Guerdie and drinks of the wells of Kildingie will escape all maladies except black death.”) This variety has been embodied in bread and also eaten with dried fish, butter and potatoes. It may be used as a substitute for chewing tobacco, and enthusiasts declare that while it has an acrid taste, the odour resembles violets. Lord Inchcape, who died shortly before World War II, lived beyond four score years and believed that his lifelong good health was due to this seaweed. Some people eat dulse fresh, as a crisp, sweet salad, or cook and serve like spinach. The limit of ingenuity is reached in Kamchatka,

where it provides an alcoholic drink.

Seaweed may be pickled. Dried seaweed does not deteriorate. I have heard of a young couple living on the Cape coast who collected seaweed during their honeymoon and made a good seaweed jelly from it on their thirtieth wedding anniversary.

Laver, the edible seaweed beloved by Irish peasants, has its South African counterparts. One variety known as “sea lettuce” makes an excellent salad when dressed with oil and vinegar, lemon, pepper and chopped onions. An epicure described the flavour as reminiscent of olives and oysters. Or you can soak it in fresh water, boil and serve mixed with oatmeal and fried in flat-cakes. Some people eat hot laver with mutton.

Kelp has many uses. Shredded and powdered fronds may be used to add substance to soup and meat dishes. A tea substitute has been concocted with the aid of kelp. Then there is sushi, the popular Japanese sandwich, consisting of a slab of prepared seaweed on which is placed rice and strips of meat. The sushi is then rolled and cut into slices.

If you have taken birds’ nest soup in a Chinese restaurant then you have eaten seaweed. A sea

swallow, nesting in caves, eats red seaweed which is softened in the stomach. It is then disgorged, and gelatinous layers are formed in the nest. This is the queer substance which is boiled and added to chicken broth, a luxurious seaweed dish indeed.

Seaweed is seldom widely used in those fortunate countries where vegetables are cheap and abundant. It is not always easy to harvest seaweed, and not everyone relishes the seaweed flavours. Yet where vegetables are scarce these crops from Neptune's garden satisfy the human craving for chlorophyll and vitamins, minerals and trace elements.

When I was visiting Norway I heard of a seaweed remedy for human ills called "alga flour", and bought a tin. One teaspoon each day, blended with water or fruit juice, was the prescribed dose. This would give the correct daily proportion of iodine.

I have pointed out the familiar sight of animals feeding on seaweed. One small breed of sheep in the Orkneys lives almost entirely on a seaweed diet, yielding a dark meat rich in iodine. It has been proved that the addition of dried seaweed to the diets had led to a rise in the milk yield of cows and higher egg production of poultry. Jersey cattle are

said to owe their resistance to disease to the seaweed in their food. French veterinary surgeons treat certain horse ailments with seaweed. One of the red seaweeds makes a fairly efficient insecticide. You may be glad to throw seaweed in the fire when no other fuel is available. And there may still be a few old-fashioned fishermen who hang up flat bands of seaweed and watch the movements rather than listen to official weather forecasts.

Giants of Neptune's garden are the kelps called *Macrocystis*, with stalks of fifty feet in Cape waters, and which may reach a length of almost two hundred feet elsewhere. This kelp is common on the Cape west coast, though a great bed of it reported last century by the famous botanist Sir Joseph Hooker on the Agulhas bank appears to have vanished. The inshore *seetrompet* is a dwarf compared with *Macrocystis*, for it seldom exceeds thirty feet. It is *Macrocystis* which supports the Wegener' continental drift theory. You find it on coasts far apart, where similarities among plants of sea and land suggest that the continents were once joined.

Sea lettuce, "seaweed bread", carragheen, rish moss, red lace, sea cabbage and pepper dulse, sea

parsley or sea-string – these are gifts from Neptune's garden which may save mankind from starvation one day if the land fails to feed its millions. When you turn to the sea plants for nourishment the wheel has gone full circle. I spoke of the ocean as the original home of our land vegetation. It is indeed the ancient water jungle, remnant of the very early days of the earth. So old are the seaweeds, so primitive, that they have neither roots nor flowers. Yet after millions of years of marvellous transformation these most simple members of the plant kingdom have covered our shore world from the beaches to the mountains with a vast and intricate beauty.

Chapter 13

BREATH OF THE SOUTH

BEHOLD A creature from a colder world. I told you that I had encountered sea-elephants on this beach. Now here is one of them, a brown monster nearly fifteen feet long with a snout like an elephant's trunk and little yellow tusks.

Perhaps I last saw this rare visitor as a youngster on one of the Tristan da Cunha islands. Certainly it brings with it an icy breath of the south. I can imagine this seal, the largest of the tribe, rippling its blubber among thousands more of its kind on the stony beaches of the lone islands scattered along the "roaring forties". In the stormy latitudes of the Antarctic fringe the sea elephant is at home. I cannot imagine why it has come to my beach, and this is a mystery the naturalists have not yet solved. It seems that the sea-elephants spend most of their time on the broad face of the Southern Ocean, hauling out on the lonely isles to breed each spring. Their range is vast, but covered as they are in blubber they have no business on the warm shores of South Africa.

Yet these strays have been swimming up from the

south for centuries. Salt River fishermen shot one ten years after Van Riebeeck's landing, "a dreadful sea monster with a head covered with stiff thick hair exactly like a lion". Another one hauled itself ashore in Rogge Bay half a century later, and was dispatched by the Governor's soldiers firing musket-balls. They were always rare visitors, and nearly always they were shot. One of them was reported to have attacked a policeman at the entrance of Table Bay Docks seventy years ago. The policeman killed it and took the skin. More recently a sea-elephant lay sunning itself on a flat rock in Simon's Bay near the town pier. Out went the harbour Master with a motor-boat and harpooned the tired old visitor. It towed the boat as far as Glencairn and then died. That one was seventeen feet long.

Possibly these old bulls have been defeated in battle by younger rivals. They may have set out across the ocean in search of new mates and a more peaceful home. Or perhaps they have lost their way and drifted northwards with a current that brought them to these shores. It was hard to imagine a sea creature without a sense of direction, however, and I am not surprised that the naturalists are baffled.

Nearly all the sea-elephants that have come to South Africa have been old bulls, but a cow elephant-seal and new-born pup were identified on the Bredasdorp coast a few years ago.

South Africa's own seals, the Cape fur seals, have learnt to keep away from all but the loneliest mainland beaches. In the days when mankind consisted only of a few bands of prowling *Strandlopers* the seals were not so careful, and the kitchen middens of the ancient beachcombers reveal great banquets of seal meat. Above all the *Strandlopers* loved seal brains. You will not find a skull which has not been broken open.

Now and again the seals forget that human beings are foes. They come ashore as though seeking company, like the dogs that they are. Miss Kitty Boonzaaier of Blaauwberg found a seal peeping into her cottage not long ago. It had slithered up from the beach, past the dogs and fowls in the yard, and raised itself against the half door. This friendly seal accepted fish gratefully.

Cape fur seals are not so amenable to training as other species. They are eared seals (or *Otariidae* as the scientists say), as opposed to the true seals or

Phocidae, which have no external ears. Cape fur seals are not sea-lions, though this fact was only established recently by Mr. R. W. Rand, M.Sc., after long research. Mr. Rand spent years observing the Cape fur seal in its rookeries, and he is the only scientist in the world who can speak with authority on this species. He says that the presence of solitary sea-lions has been reported from the coast of South West Africa, but these reports have not yet been confirmed. Sea-lions have no under-coat, and their pelts are not valued highly, like those of fur seals. They breed among the Falkland Islands, large, golden-brown seals, the old males having manes; and in Australian and New Zealand waters. If they do indeed visit South West Africa, they have swum much farther than the sea-elephants.

Fiercest of all the seals is the grey, yellow-spotted leopard seal. This twelve-footer is regarded as one of the most dangerous creatures of the Antarctic. It would be greatly feared if it were not slow on land. The sharp, curved teeth are strong enough to slash off a man's arm or leg.

One leopard seal, and one only, has been known to visit South Africa. That was an eight-foot female, found in 1946 near East London. Someone had

wounded it with a bullet which had grazed the head, making it more than usually vicious. However, it was killed and mounted for the East London museum. Very few museums in the world possess specimens of the leopard seal.

It looks more like a dinosaur than a mammal. No one has ever captured a leopard seal alive.

Another seal of which only one example has been known in South Africa was the white crab-eating seal also found on a beach near East London. Kind people carried this gentle seal back to the sea, but it insisted on returning to the beach. It had been injured, and finally someone shot it to end the pain. The crab eater is creamy white in winter, changing to dark greyish-brown in summer. It is the typical seal of the pack-ice, but almost nothing is known of its habits.

Seals have few enemies apart from man. The leopard seal will prey on other members of the family. Sharks and killer whales take a certain number of seals. But man exterminated the southern fur seal a century ago, and the Cape fur seal is clubbed to the tune of thirty thousand pelts a year.

Among the Cape seal rookeries which have been

worked for centuries is the rock known as Robbenstein Island (or Seal Ledges) only a few miles to the north of Blaauwberg beach. And among the tough seamen who won a living from the rock early this century was a Scot named John Ovenstone, founder of the well-known fishing firm.

Ovenstone was selected in London, early in 1900, as fisheries officer for the Cape Government. Owing to the South African War his passage was delayed. However, he was determined to settle at the Cape, and he resigned his official post and found his own way to Cape Town later that year. He bought a teak lifeboat from the wrecked *Tantalum Castle* for twenty-five pounds, decked her himself, and named her *Scotia*.

Sealing at that period was controlled by two autocratic characters, Captains Spence and Jackson, acting on behalf of the government. Ovenstone, however, discovered that the law laid down that "seals may not be captured or killed on the rookeries", and decided that he was free to hunt seals in the waters surrounding the rookeries. At first he used shot-guns, secured a good haul at Robbenstein, and sold the pelts to a Glasgow fur dealer at satisfactory prices.

Ovenstone's son Robert sailed with him in the *Scotia* as mate. A Jewish partner, who was a clever carpenter, often accompanied them. The carpenter was always seasick, yet he made trip after trip, fascinated in some queer way by the sea. Shot-guns disturbed the seals, so Ovenstone designed nets. He set them round Robbensteen and caught many seals, the first man to use nets in South African waters.

Captains Spence and Jackson considered that Ovenstone was poaching on their preserves and uttered threat after threat. Finally they took Ovenstone to court, but Ovenstone won the case. Then they persuaded the government to force all private sealers to take out licences. Ovenstone applied for a licence and was refused. This time Ovenstone took Spence and Jackson to court, demanding that they show cause why he was not a fit and proper person to hold a sealing licence. Ovenstone won again.

Spence and Jackson, who received a handsome commission on pelts, then decided to achieve by force what they could not do by law. They sent two whale-boats to work Robbensteen from the mainland. Their crews were instructed to drive Ovenstone away from Robbensteen; and one day

Ovenstone and his son returned to the *Scotia* after setting the nets to find a gang armed with clubs on board their little ship. Ovenstone was prepared for this reception committee. He had shot-guns in his dinghy, and he and Robert took careful aim at the intruders. "I'll count ten ... then we fire," announced John Ovenstone. "Your headman will stay on board. All the rest of you will leave."

A mad scramble for the boats followed this ultimatum. Ovenstone then stepped on board the *Scotia*, tackled the headman with his fists and threw him overboard. A whale boat picked him up before the sharks arrived. "Rough treatment ... yes, but those were tough days," remarked Robert Ovenstone, who told me the story.

Next time the *Scotia* anchored off Robbensteen, several bullets sang through her rigging. Ovenstone reported this episode to the police. Mounted police rode up the beach to the camp of the sealers opposite Robbensteen, and three rifles were seized. Soon afterwards Spence and Jackson withdrew their men, and Ovenstone was left in peace.

John Ovenstone turned over to the more tranquil occupation of catching and packing crawfish, with a

shed on Woodstock beach as his headquarters. It was a hazardous revival of a difficult trade from the financial point of view, and when money was tight the *Scotia* sometimes ran down to Robbensteen for a little profitable sealing. The firm grew into a great enterprise, with a fleet at work up and down the coast. Year after year, until fairly recently, the old ship's lifeboat *Scotia* held a place of honour among the Ovenstone craft.

Cape Town merchants were sending parties of sealers to the isles of the "roaring forties" almost a century ago, and growing wealthy on the spoils. American sealers were there before them. The greedy quest for new seal rookeries led a certain Captain Burdick of Nantucket in 1821 to "a long black coastline which rose sheer out of the water, capped by ice and snow". Burdick was probably the discoverer of the Antarctic continent, though there were rival claims.

Round the cold southern latitudes of the globe there runs a broken circle of desolate isles where the seals breed. Most of them are uninhabited, but all can show relics of man, castaways and scientists, explorers and sealers. I have spent a few days,

during two visits, at Tristan da Cunha, the only island with an old, settled population. All the rest are Robinson Crusoe isles, some with huts for weather observers and wireless stations, others with only the sea-elephants on the beaches.

Tristan is a great volcanic cone with two smaller, uninhabited isles close by. South Georgia is mountainous, treeless, ice-covered; but the coast was alive with thousands of seal hunters early last century, and this century it became a famous whaling base. Twelve hundred miles south-east of the Cape lies the Union's new "colony" of Prince Edward and Marion islands; fog-bound isles where the old sealers left blubber pots and stoves, boats and huts. Farther east are a number of French islands; the Crozets, which have seen desperate adventures; St. Paul, a strange, volcanic crater which has been breached by the sea; Amsterdam, a scene of disaster in recent years; and the huge, gale-swept mass of Kerguelen Land, seventy miles long, with fjords and secure anchorages, jagged peaks, glaciers and lakes.

One sight which all these sub-Antarctic islands have in common is the driftwood, the flotsam that has piled up through the years until some of the

remote beaches have become nautical museums. Here the searcher might solve many of the mysteries of missing ships. Here are the timbers of New Bedford whalers mingled with teak cabin doors from lost clippers and the steel plates of steamers. Hatchways and figureheads, smashed masts and yards and skylights, binnacle stands and broken casks, oars and handrails, copper fittings and iron davits; all these have been driven by gales and swept together by currents to form cemeteries of the sea on beaches seldom trodden by man.

All these silent fragments suggest disaster at sea. Ships that have struck uncharted rocks. Ships ablaze. Ships that have run blindly into icebergs and ice islands. Ships that have been pooped in westerly gales and gone down with all hands. Ships of last century and ships of yesterday. They suggest disaster, but seldom indeed is there a fragment with a name to tell the story of disaster.

Some of the islands are coveted near the beaches with tussock grass, and similar growths have been identified on southern islands thousands of miles apart. Some of them also have the tough and bitter Kerguelen cabbage, which has saved many castaways from scurvy. This is the plant which the

great botanist Sir Joseph Hooker described as the most interesting plant found in the whole Antarctic.

Relics of the old sealers still lie rusting in canvas and ruined huts. I know a scientist who spent months on Marion Island, studying the seals and birds. During a spell of fine weather he tramped round the coast of the island, taking four days. Imagine his surprise when he came suddenly upon a deserted village. No one in the South African settlement at Transvaal Cove had suspected the existence of this place. The scientist established the fact that the row of timber huts and caves in a cliff face had been occupied by sealers early this century. They had left their names on the walls and rocks, with various dates from 1909 to 1921. In the huts were rusty flintlock rifles, revolvers and knives, stoves and coal, and a quantity of food which was still in perfect condition, thanks to the climate. Tins of Australian butter, cases of mixed pickles which had matured beautifully, tea and beans were stored in the pantry.

“That’s what I call a lonely island,” remarked the scientist. “I was there in 1952, and I believe the only other biologists to land there were Professor Moseley of the *Challenger*, with young Charles

Darwin as his companion, nearly eighty years before me.”

It was also my good fortune to meet an old sailor man who had spent six months on Prince Edward Island, close to Marion, in 1912-13 after the loss of the Cape Town sealing schooner *Seabird*. It was a memorable tale he told of extreme isolation, bitter cold and snow and heavy rain, monotony and suspense. One of his shipmates lost his way in the dark, fell into a stream and was drowned. Another died after an illness which was never diagnosed. The captain was preparing to sail across the stormiest ocean in the world in an open twenty-five foot boat when the steam whaler which had been searching for them arrived at last.

That man really made me see the lives of all castaways on the unfriendly, frozen, southern isles. Boats turned over to give shelter, the gaps filled with turf; sails as tents; or stone huts roofed with the skins of sea-elephants. Beds of grass, and again the sea-elephant skins as blankets. Three weeks of fine, clear weather in a year. No soap. No scissors. Shaggy beards under sealskin caps. Sharp rocks everywhere, and boots of penguin skins.

Petrels for breakfast, fried in blubber. Tongues and hearts of sea-elephants for lunch; or young, roasted albatross; or the meat of young seal, greatest delicacy of all. Soup of sea-elephant’s flippers for the meal they called “tea”, with penguin eggs to follow. And always the bitter wild cabbage that they ate only to keep the scurvy away. Sea-elephant blubber as fuel, with driftwood when they could find it. The captain’s Bible to read, and the log-book of their ill-fated ship to record each day of exile.

So much secrecy was observed by all who sent their ships to the southern isles that the full story of suffering and achievement will never be told. They preferred seal pelts to fame as discoverers.

It is impossible to trace the earliest expeditions from the Cape to the southern isles. I find, however, that the schooner *Adventure* was lost while sealing among the Crozet group as far back as 1825, and that the master, mate and thirteen men were picked up by the whaler *Cape Packet* after existing for eighteen months as castaways. Only one man had died, in spite of great hardships. On arrival in Cape Town the master of the *Cape Packet* declared that he had never seen or heard of the Crozets before,

and had sighted them and put in there by sheer chance.

Another expedition set out in the barque *Marcus* for Prince Edward, Marion and the Crozets a century ago. They were wrecked on North-east Island, in the Crozet group, landing with difficulty, empty-handed, half-naked and barefooted. "They lived on what they could find for three months, when the schooner *Flora* brought them to Cape Town," reported the *Cape of Good Hope Shipping Gazette*. I wish that I could have met those castaways, for the scene of their shipwreck is a barren rock eight hundred feet high, and they must have been lucky, or resourceful, to survive.

Poppe, Schunhoff and Guttery, the old-established Cape Town shipping firm, was sending parties of sealers down south in the 'sixties of last century. Their men were sealing on East Island in the Crozets when an open boat arrived with a heart-rending tale. Captain Bertinetti and five men had put off from the sealer *Guadalquiver* on the far side of the island to go sealing, and had lost touch with the ship in a storm. Their boat was damaged. Although it was summer, the captain had lost both his feet as a result of frostbite, and one of the sailors

had suffered in the same way. They had almost starved for eight days, cut off by cliffs from the other side of the island. At last the weather moderated and they were able to repair the boat and reach Poppe's men. Their own ship found them later. Poppe's firm owned the schooners *Prince* and *Dependant*, both lost on the Crozets soon afterwards. Their schooner *Esther* brought the crews to Cape Town.

Another expedition at that period was not so fortunate. Edward Elsters of Cape Town was in charge of a sealing party which was hunting along the shores of Possession Island in the Crozets. This crew consisted of one Englishman, one Scot, one Russian, one Swede and one American. The boat overturned, and all perished in the icy water.

Hog Island in the Crozets was the scene of as strange and tragic an adventure as any in the story of the sea. I would not have believed it if I had not found absolute proof. Thirteen men, survivors of a wrecked French vessel named the *Tamaris*, faced starvation on Hog Island seventy years ago. They found a provision depot established long before; but most of the food had been spoilt or stolen by sealers or eaten by rats. The remnants kept them alive for a

month. During this time the desperate men punched out a message on a corned beef tin. They fashioned the thin metal into a collar, caught an albatross and fitted the collar round its neck. It was a ten thousand to one chance; but they could think of no other way of sending news to the outside world.

When only a few scraps of food remained, the shipwrecked crew left Hog Island in their open boat for Possession Island, about sixty miles away, knowing that they would find another provision depot there. Before leaving, they built a cairn of stones and left an account of the shipwreck, and their movements, beneath it. Meanwhile the albatross, a magnificent messenger it turned out to be, was flying steadily over the ocean wastes towards Australia. It was found dead on the beach near Fremantle a few weeks later. The finder, a member of the staff of the Governor of Western Australia, realised that this dramatic appeal stamped in tin was no hoax. A cable was sent to the French Government, and very soon the French cruiser *Meurthe* was steaming to the rescue of the castaways.

It is sad to have to record that she found no trace of them beyond the message left on Hog Island.

Plainly they had perished during the stormy open-boat passage between the two islands. If you suspect that the long arm of coincidence has been stretched too far in this tale, you will find a brief official account in the British Admiralty sailing directions for the Indian Ocean.

Many of these remote islands off the liner track from the Cape to Australia have been stocked with “Robinson Crusoe” depots for castaways. They are seldom needed nowadays. In the past hundreds of shipwrecked men and women have found shelter and food in the lonely huts where they have lived for weeks and sometimes for months.

One typical depot was stocked with strong barrels containing a ton of preserved beef, half a ton of biscuits, cases of sardines, twenty blankets, fifteen pairs of shoes, fifteen pairs of trousers, spears, hatchets, cooking pots, matches, guns and cartridges. The unhappy fact must be recorded that these life-saving stations have been broken into by fishermen from Mauritius and Reunion who have raided the precious stores intended for shipwrecked men. In these empty seas there is no way of preventing such mean thefts.

Most of the seafaring nations of the world have stocked the larders of the lonely islands. Thus, when a Norwegian Antarctic Expedition in the schooner *Catarina* was wrecked among the Crozet Islands in 1907, the men lived on provisions placed there twenty years before. The Norwegian Government sent out a ship to replenish the depot.

Twelve hundred miles from the Crozets you come to Kerguelen, a busy place at the height of the sealing and whaling boom more than a century ago, but uninhabited for years at a stretch nowadays. Once you might have found six hundred American whalers hunting off Kerguelen at the same time. If you were shipwrecked there today you would probably eat a good many meals of Kerguelen cabbage before you were rescued.

Wild dogs are the curse of Kerguelen. Their ancestors were pets in ships lost on the island. The dogs of today are a menace to human life, and no man dare go far unarmed. When the sealing parties leave the remains of their victims on a beach, huge packs of dogs come growling down from the mountains in search of food.

The interior of Kerguelen has never been explored,

though Mawson's aeroplane flew over parts of the island. It is impossible to travel far across country, for there are death-traps everywhere, bogs and quicksands. A volcano streams occasionally, and there are several hot springs. Above the treacherous anchorage known as Christmas Harbour where the Erebus and Terror wintered, there is a hill called Table Mountain. Royal Cove is a safer place, with a labyrinth of islets and over twenty miles of landlocked water. Mount Ross, named after the Sir James Ross who set up a magnetic observatory on the island, rises to more than six thousand feet. There was once a strong body of opinion in France which favoured transferring the penal settlement from Devil's Island, Guiana, to Kerguelen. The climate of Kerguelen, though bitterly cold and boisterous, is healthy and suitable for hard work.

Four men who had been shipwrecked on Kerguelen in 1823 were rescued and brought to Cape Town after more than two years on the island. They had lived on sea-elephants and cabbage, and clothed themselves in the skins of sea-leopards. Six years later a sealing party which included a naval engineer named Richard Harris were wrecked on Kerguelen. They built a boat from the wreckage of

their ship and sailed from Kerguelen to Tasmania in six weeks-no mean feat of seamanship considering the weather in those latitudes.

Many other castaways came to know the inlets and black basalt beaches of Kerguelen. It was not until 1908, however, that a ship left Durban with a large party of Norwegians and forty Zulus who were to colonise the island. The ship was the steamer *Jeanne d'Arc*, commanded by Captain Ring and owned by the Kerguelen Whaling Company. She carried sheep and ponies, poultry and pigs, besides the material for a whaling station. The venture failed. Two years later the *Jeanne d'Arc* returned to Durban. The Zulus told the reporters that although they wore double shirts and socks they were never warm; and they considered that two pounds a month and all found was a poor reward for their exile on Kerguelen.

In spite of this setback another colonisation scheme was started in 1927, when the whaling steamer *Lozere* took three French farmers and their wives to Kerguelen. They, too, carried livestock, cows and oxen, pigs, sheep and goats. The wives were the first women ever to set foot on Kerguelen. But the *Lozere* was wrecked the following year, and a

rescue ship had to be sent from Cape Town to bring back the settlers and whaler men.

One man in Cape Town who knew how to make money out of the wreck-strewn waters of Kerguelen and other southern isles was the redoubtable Charles Ocean Johnson. He founded the trawling and whaling company with George D. Irvin early this century. Johnson was a seaman as well as a business man. This powerful Swede was also a character.

Johnson sent the old trawler *Victoria* on a sealing expedition to Prince Edward and Marion nearly half a century ago. The skipper put back three times for various reasons. Johnson then fired him and took the *Victoria* south himself. She was almost worn out, a tiny craft with only six inches of freeboard and cranky engines; but Johnson knew how to handle her. He was back in a few months with a valuable cargo of sea-elephant skins and oil.

After the loss of the *Seabird*, which I have mentioned, Johnson turned to whaling and fitted out the S.S. *Restitution* as one of the pioneer floating factories. She worked in the Antarctic and on the coast of Angola. Johnson often sailed in his

company's ships. He loved the sea, but was sometimes violent when confined in an office on shore. Tales are still told of the rough justice which he dispensed when his employees displeased him. Once a pair of whale catchers were leaving the Cape for the Antarctic when the skippers decided to have one last drink together. As a result, the little ships collided and had to put back for repairs. Johnson went for one of the guilty men with his fists, and was fined five pounds for assault. "I'd like to pay another five and give the other fellow a hiding," Johnson informed the magistrate. He was fined again for contempt of court.

Johnson arranged a lease of the southern part of Kerguelen shortly after World War I, and year after year, when the ice floes broke up in October, he sent a flotilla there for the sealing and whaling. Largest of the ships was the auxiliary barquentine *Sound of Jura*, a rather cranky ship with a grand figurehead. She brought back the oil. *Kildalkey* and *Kilfenora*, ex-mystery ships, were used for sealing. (These ships had bows and sterns of peculiar design, shaped so that German submarines would not know which way they were steaming.) These two ships carried large cauldrons on their fore-

decks for boiling the seal blubber; and they poked their sharp prows into many uncharted harbours. The coasting steamer *Hamlet* and two typical North Sea drifters, *Plough* and *Galaxy*, completed the flotilla.

The late Lieut. Commander R. D. Cruickshank, who sailed as master of the *Sound of Jura* in 1926-27, told me that he lived for months in an aroma of overcooked mutton, for that was the smell of roasted sea-elephant. Often he went out with the sealers, visiting places named by early American visitors – Swain's Harbour, Shot Bag Bay, Young William's Bay and Saltskin Bay. Other places had been named by Captain Cook and his mate Bligh (later the notorious Bligh of the *Bounty*), who were there nearly two centuries ago. The large black rock called Bligh's Cap is still to be found on the charts.

In a cave at Sprightly Harbour, Cruickshank found a provision depot left there in 1914 by Captain Raymond du Barry, the Frenchman who surveyed the island and wrote the Kerguelen classic "Fifteen Thousand Miles in a Ketch". (I still have that book at my bedside.) An airtight box contained matches, and in a tin trunk were two oilskin coats and an overcoat in good condition.

Cruickshank found beauty on this grim island at the place known as Circular Cove. A waterfall drops into a deep pool. Fifty young seal pups were playing happily in the clear, fresh water; diving, twisting and turning in the lovely pool. Far below the surface they flashed by each other, circling and swirling and sweeping up to the surface in a curtain of spray.

An old friend of mine who accompanied several expeditions to Kerguelen and farther south was the late Commander Q. H. Bullard. (I lent him a book on wireless telegraphy in 1917, and he always said that it influenced his choice of a career.) He was a radio pioneer in the Antarctic.

Bullard was once entrusted with the task of reasserting Britain's claim to an island. This was Heard Island, a high island with an active volcano to the south of Kerguelen. Heard Island was the place where Professor Moseley of the Challenger found a sealing party in 1874, and was informed that occasionally a man became so miserable that he had to be shot.

Britain had claimed Heard Island after World War I, but had not occupied it. So when the *Kildalkey*

went sealing there from Kerguelen in 1929, the crew built a lattice tower and Bullard raised the Union Jack and performed the annexation ceremony. This duty fell to his lot because the master of the *Kildalkey* was a Norwegian.

Seventeen men from the *Kildalkey* were marooned on Heard Island while sealing during that expedition, for a sudden gale blew up and the motor-boat could not reach them. Next day one man was picked up, and he reported that the others were walking over the ice-covered mountains to reach a sheltered cove where the *Kildalkey* often anchored. The *Kildalkey* anchored in the cove and waited.

At last five men were sighted and taken on board, suffering from exposure. They said that all of them had been living on the blood of penguins; all were half-dead with exposure, and eleven men had dropped back owing to hunger and fatigue. It was obvious that they would die in the snow if they were not rescued.

Bullard and Tennant, the second mate, set out in search of the lost men. They carried food and brandy and other medical comforts, but it was heavy going after the snowstorm which had been

raging. Nevertheless, they found all the missing sealers. “They were famished, and tore the bread out of our hands, and ate like wolves,” Bullard declared. “The last man was delirious – he told us later that he had given up all hope of rescue.” Captain Hansen of the *Kildalkey* and Bullard were caught in a blizzard on another occasion when they tramped ten miles along the west coast of Heard Island to correct the chart. By sheer chance they stumbled across a hut which had been put up by the first American sealers to work the island more than a century ago. That hut saved their lives.

I think these far southern isles were never meant for men. Only the birds and the seals and sea-elephants are at home on those cruel beaches. The men who clubbed the seals have left their great iron blubber pots on all the isles, iron pots and graves. Lonely graves, so lonely, so far from any civilised land that the man who tries to read a faint inscription may well ask himself whether he has not come too far.

Chapter 14

ON MEMORY WHARF

ON DAYS when I am doubtful about the weather on my beach, when the north-west rain is near or the driven sand of summer will hurt my eyes, then I find a change of scene in dockland. I have known Table Bay Docks since I was a schoolboy.

Wherever I wander you will find me loafing on the waterfront. Not long ago I was in Copenhagen, admiring the finest statue in the world, the little green mermaid of Hans Andersen's story on the rock just off Langelinie. I went again and again to the arm of the sea that comes into Copenhagen at Nyhavn, with its street of seamen's bars and tattoo artists, junk shops and honky-tonks. In Gothenburg I was drawn to a cafe decorated like a sailing ship's saloon, overlooking the harbour. At Oslo I was on board Nansen's Fram and the Kon Tiki raft. Bergen is one long waterfront, with the fish sold alive in the market on the quay. The whole seafaring world comes to the waterfront, just as the whole ocean comes to my beach.

So when I am tired of pavements and the beach does not beckon to me, then I go down the streets

that end in the great highway of the ocean. I like the shops in that quarter of Cape Town. Years ago I used to buy odds and ends for my small yacht at a ship chandler's shop in Dock Road, and never did I find more enjoyment in spending money. Captain Eiserman, I remember, had a fine collection of plates and saucers in the shop; each piece bearing the house-flag of a shipping company. Here were binnacles and shackles, books of sailing directions, brass log rotators, sidelights red and green, and canned foods in the enormous tins demanded by ship's cooks.

Next door was a shop for seamen, with sou'westers, oilskins and seaboots hanging up outside. On a dark afternoon they looked, at a distance, like seamen who had been hanged by the neck until they were dead. In the window were sheath-knives and mouthorgans, soap and packs of cards, peaked caps and lumber jackets. That shop spread a happy illusion. It must have given many a boy the idea that a life at sea was pretty comfortable and pleasant. No doubt the well-known seamen's bar on the corner has also helped to dim the memories of hardship.

My favourite seat in Table Bay Docks, when I was

a boy, was a bollard on the wooden jetty near the cafe and the tugs. It has been rebuilt, but some of the timber must have been there for most of this century. That is where I still go to watch the ships and seamen of my life passing my seat.

Always there is something to set my dreamy mind wandering; the old cannon cemented into the wharves as bollards; the lace curtains in a coaster's portholes; a woman handing coffee out of a fishing cutter's galley to the waiting men; seals raising their flippers from the inner basin as they did when I first watched them more than forty years ago. But the odours really stir up early memories. All the south-easters of the years have never blown the old harbour aroma away, a smell at once distinctive and appetising. I wish I could tear it apart, but it is as secret as any Paris perfume, and as complex. Tar and coaldust and many cargoes are there. Salt water is the base, with the essence of the sun poured in generously. The sharp tang of fish comes over from the trawler wharves. Occasionally, as a special treat, there is a whiff of sea cookery; pea soup made by a sea cook with hambone flavour, and dry hash to follow; or an intriguing suspicion of garlic and *bacalhau* from a Portuguese galley.

Dock music consists of bells and the "brungg .. brungg" of engine-room telegraphs and the pulse-beat of engines; rattle of chains and whine of electric winches; the groaning of mooring ropes and the creaking of the ships themselves. Always the sea speaks with many voices, shouting against the breakwater, whimpering round the piles under my old wooden wharf.

This has been my theatre all through the years. Among the actors are thin lascars, neat Chinese, swaggering West Indian negroes with razors in their belts, tattooed Norsemen, British seamen with weathered faces hurrying off to play soccer near the old hospital. The scene painters have provided funnels of many colours from yellow to dead black, and there are gay house-flags, too, for all who understand the heraldry of the sea. Among the ships are smart young ladies, freshly painted, and old hags of the ocean that I knew when they were young. Floating palaces and floating horrors ... yet in the evening there is a light which transforms the ugliest of ships, so that all become as romantic and adventurous as the frigates and hookers of Van Riebeeck's day. Thousands of ships I have seen passing from this harbour to make strange landfalls

far away, and some there were that never made land again. Yes, this is a drama by day, a picture at sundown and a saga for all who have imagination when night falls and the lights shine down the water.

I suppose my oldest friends nowadays are among the tugs, for they last longer than most ships and seldom indeed are they wrecked. As a schoolboy the Sir Charles Elliott was my favourite, for Captain Swan made me welcome on the bridge, taught me to steer (once away from watchful eyes at the port office) and showed me how, with marvellous judgment, a large ship may be drawn tenderly away from the wharf and nosed round until she heads for open sea. Little did I know that nearly forty years later I would see the bones of the Sir Charles Elliott in the surf off the most desolate stretch of South West African coast.

A tug I have known for more than four decades is the *Ludwig Wiener*, the most powerful tug in the world when she arrived in Table Bay shortly before World War I. More than once as a reporter I took passage in the *Ludwig Wiener* when she went out into the fog to pass the tow-rope aboard stranded ships. She has seen many a distress rocket in her

time, steamed through seas littered with wreckage, picked up survivors from the lifeboats. Her great fire hoses have been rigged over red-hot decks, and she has towed disabled ships for days. In peace the *Ludwig Wiener* has flown the Royal Standard with the Governor-General as passenger. In war she has mounted a twelve-pounder gun and carried the White Ensign into enemy waters.

The strangest tale that the *Ludwig Wiener* could tell goes back to World War I, when a steamer reported by wireless that she had sighted the American four-masted barquentine *Puako* thirty miles from Robben Island flying a signal asking for help as the crew had mutinied. Off went the *Ludwig Wiener* with seventeen armed police under Sub-Inspector Howe, and the American Consul on board. She steamed through the rain squalls of a bitter night, using her searchlights; but not until daybreak could she reach the *Puako*, at anchor off Blaauwberg beach.

The police boarded her and were astonished to find eighteen men lashed back to back to the booms. Almost at a glance the police officer realised that these men were not mutineers. They were starving, for they had been without food for three days and

most of them were helpless and exhausted.

Captain Pedersen, the master, known in the American merchant service as “Hell Fire” Pedersen, told the police that the men had mutinied and he had been forced to put them out of action. He had worked the ship into Table Bay with the aid of the mate and second mate, who were his own sons, and the carpenter, who was also a relative.

All eighteen men were sent straight to hospital. The deadly “Spanish ‘flu” epidemic was raging in Cape Town at that time, and ten of the *Puako*’s seamen died. No doubt they had been weakened by their treatment at the hands of “Hell Fire” Pedersen. The survivors informed the police that two seamen, crazy with fear, had jumped overboard six days before the barquentine reached Cape Town. One of them had gripped the log-line in an attempt to save his life, but Pedersen had fired with a revolver and killed him.

Pedersen was tried in the United States and sentenced to five years’ penal servitude, while his sons went to prison for shorter terms. It appears, however, that Pedersen’s lawyer secured his release after only a month or two in prison. Pedersen

recovered his master’s certificate and went back to sea in command. A queer affair, the *Puako* mutiny, and I am sure the full tale has never been told.

A ship of fond memory because of the link with my boyhood was the little steamer *Pieter Faure*. She had a trim grey hull and yellow funnel. I voyaged in her to Robben Island and back several years before World War I; the first voyage I ever made alone. The *Pieter Faure* really ought to have been named after Joseph Orpen, member of the old Cape Parliament, who urged the government, session after session, to start a marine survey of Cape seas. No enthusiasm was shown for the idea, but in the end a small amount was put on the estimates. Finally the *Pieter Faure* (named after the Minister of Agriculture) was ordered, and about sixty years ago she arrived in Table Bay from Glasgow.

She was a true pioneer, the first specially-designed steam trawler to drop her nets in the waters which have since yielded great wealth. Soles were caught off Cape Infanta and sold in Mossel Bay at a penny a pair – presumably to show what could be done, as the *Pieter Faure* was purely a non-commercial survey ship. Private enterprise followed up her

discoveries. The *Pieter Faure*, however, was taken off this valuable research venture during an economy campaign and put on the Robben Island run. When the lepers were moved from the island the *Pieter Faure* was sold to a private firm as a trawler. She ended her days fishing, and after half a century of service she was scuttled near Port Elizabeth.

My guide to the waterfront when I became a reporter was a remarkable character named A. E. Strange. He had been a professional seaman before entering journalism, and his greatest claim to fame was that he had once served as mate of the *Cutty Sark*, one of the fastest sailing ships ever launched. (Strange admitted that the *Cutty Sark* had never been able to prove herself superior in speed to the contemporary tea clipper *Thermopylae*.) I had known *Cutty Sark* as a visitor to Table Bay Docks during that dark period in her long career when she was sailing as the *Ferreira* under the Portuguese flag with a much reduced sail plan. Her cargo of coal had shifted in a gale, and she was towed in dismasted, and lucky to be afloat.

I watched them rigging *Cutty Sark* as a barquentine. No doubt there are still many old hands who

remember the task of finding timber in South Africa worthy of this queen of the seas. When I stepped on board *Cutty Sark* I walked reverently, touched her wheel and stared into her binnacle as though I expected to see the face of one of her great masters, Wallace or Woodget, reflected in the glass. She had done seventeen knots often, that ship, running before the gales in the “roaring forties”. I wondered how it would feel to steer her at that speed, lashed to the wheel. One of the Portuguese mates watched me with a smile.

Cutty Sark was built in 1870, a year when steamers were already running on regular routes, so that she was really doomed before her first voyage. Yet her owner Willis, himself a master in sail, had faith in clipper ships and asked the designer to give him the ultimate in the shape of a deep-sea, square-rigged racer. *Cutty Sark* was under a thousand tons gross, but she had a powerful stern. Some clippers were so fine that they were often pooped, and Willis wanted his men to be safe.

I remember, too, the witch carried as figurehead, the lovely witch of the poem by Robert Burns called Tam O’Shanter. Strange told me wistfully that the ship once had a cavalcade of naked girls

dancing along the bows, port and starboard; but the Australians (of all people) objected to this marine art exhibition and the nudes were removed. *Cutty Sark* is now embedded in concrete in a special dock at Greenwich, idol of the seafaring world, saved for posterity. I visited her there not long ago, and recaptured something of the old romance.

Strange was a lean man and his years at sea must have given him a physique far beyond the normal. When I met him a few years ago he had passed ninety, but he was as spry as ever. I suppose it is too much to hope that this fine old sailor man is still alive somewhere and able to read these words.

Full-rigged ships came to life again during World War I, and there would often be a line of them along the West Quay in Table Bay Docks. It is a picture that never fades. Among the fine sailing ships that came in at intervals between the wars was the Argentine training ship *Presidente Sarmiento*. She made more than two dozen voyages round the world, and it was an inspiring spectacle when she docked with the band playing "Valencia" and the seamen with Valentino faces giving her a harbour stow. The captain received me in an old-fashioned cabin aft, with a little stern-walk like a veranda

outside. Although I had only just had breakfast, he gave me a cup of black coffee and a liqueur, according to Argentinian custom. I dislike drinking before the evening, but on the waterfront I broke this rule for the good of the cause.

On the day after this Argentinian interlude, I remember, there was story to be gathered in a Portuguese ship, and I took a glass of Madeira with the captain. On the third morning a tiny wooden fishing smack came in from England, and I was pressed to accept a glass of the French brandy with which the crew were celebrating their arrival. A teetotal spell followed, I am glad to say, and no harm was done. But I still prefer a pot of tea at eleven in the morning.

Some of the most sumptuous meals I ever had at parties at Table Bay Docks and at sea were in German liners. I can just remember the *Woermann* ships that called before World War I. Among them was the *Frieda Woermann*, the passenger steamer that made such a dramatic escape in 1914 when war was declared. Her sudden disappearance caused alarm in many Cape homes, however, for she had a number of Cape Town passengers on board. One was a shipping clerk on holiday, a man who had

expected to enjoy a restful voyage to Swakopmund and back. There were also sixty Cape Coloured men and girls. The men were bound for the copper mines in the north of German South West Africa, while the girls had been engaged as servants.

The *Frieda Woermann* had no wireless, and it was not until the captain reached Swakopmund that he heard that war had been declared. He decided to put to sea immediately, in company with three other German ships, and head for South America. The passengers learnt to their consternation that they would have to remain on board as there was no time to land them.

So the little fleet steamed off to the west, keeping a sharp lookout for British cruisers. It took the *Frieda Woermann* nearly five weeks to reach Bahia in Brazil, for she had been cruising at economical speed and dodging about to avoid being intercepted. Meanwhile the relatives of the unwilling passengers did not know whether they were alive or dead.

The shipping clerk had to go to Liverpool to find a ship for Cape Town. His fortnight's holiday had lasted nearly four months by the time he returned. The unhappy Cape Coloured people were left

destitute, without food, money or clothes, until the kind people of Bahia raised a fund to help them. Some months passed before a ship was found to take them back to Cape Town. And one of the officers of the *Frieda Woermann*, who had married a Cape Town girl the day before the ship sailed, had to wait five years before he saw his wife again.

It was in January, 1927, that a German man-o'-war, the cruiser *Emden*, paid an eventful visit to Table Bay. Many wanted to see the ship bearing the name of the famous raider of World War I, and on a Sunday afternoon when she was open to the public, more than five thousand people gathered on the wharf. There was a rowdy element at the back of the crowd, and the queues at the gangways moved slowly. Soon the people near the edge of the quay were in danger of being pressed into the water. Eight policemen were on duty and they tried in vain to restore order. Then the panic-stricken people on the edge appealed to the German sailors for help. "Turn the hoses on the back of the crowd," someone shouted.

The officer of the watch in the *Emden* had the ship's fire hoses brought into action. It was, of course, a genuine effort to avert a disaster, but the

people who were drenched did not think so. Hats and dresses were spoilt. Some of the wet people found lumps of coal and pelted the men with the hoses. Altogether it was an unhappy episode. The hoses saved the day, however, and the Mayor of Cape Town paid a tribute to the prompt action which may have prevented a number of fatalities. Nevertheless, for days afterwards the correspondence columns of the newspapers were filled with views on the “hose-pipe incident”.

It occurred to me that there might be one or two survivors of the original *Emden* in Cape Town, and a paragraph I wrote proved that I had made a lucky shot in the dark. Fritz Lochau, one of the first *Emden*’s cooks, came to my office and told me the story of the great fight with H.M.A.S. *Sydney* from the German angle. And he added details of an incident which has never appeared in the war history books.

Lochau was a confectioner in a Cape Town bakery, and he had cooked for the *Emden*’s warrant officers. In action, he stood at the voice pipes in the control top and passed orders to the guns. He told me that when the *Sydney* was sighted, many seamen were on shore, on Direction Island in the

Cocos group, destroying the wireless and cable station. They had to put to sea and engage the *Sydney* without these men, which meant that the *Emden* was so short-handed that she could only fire one broadside at a time. When the *Emden* altered course, the gun crews would have to hurry over to the other side of the ship and man the guns there.

The *Emden* was hit again and again, the steering engine was disabled, some of the ammunition on deck blew up. Captain von Muller then beached the ship. Capture was certain, and Lochau helped to throw the money-chests overboard. “Box after box of golden sovereigns was brought up and flung into the sea,” Lochau told me. “We had gold pieces in German currency and also a great deal of British gold from the merchant ships we had captured.”

Lochau could not estimate how much gold went over the side that day. His ship was ablaze, the decks littered with the dying and the dead. The *Sydney* was still raking them with a pitiless fire, for the *Emden* might have discharged one last desperate torpedo, and it was no time for counting money. All Lochau could tell me was that there was a great deal of gold, and it took a long time to dispose of it. Someone with great presence of mind kept enough

to hand the survivors their naval pay, a procedure courteously allowed by Sydney's captain. What happened to the rest? Only a small fortune, perhaps, but solid enough and fairly easy to recover. Is it still lying scattered over the shallow coral floor of the Indian Ocean off Keeling Island?

I have another *Emden* echo among my own memories. The second *Emden* came to Cape Town again in 1934. Again I sat in her wardroom over a glass of lager with a sharp-featured *frigatten kaptein* who turned out to be a fervent Nazi. He pointed with pride to a portrait of Hitler and informed me that the old naval salute had been replaced by the Hitler salute. He also explained that the golden eagle's wings he wore on his right breast were a Nazi symbol. Little did I realise that a decade later this man, Karl Doenitz, would succeed Hitler as Fuhrer during Germany's last days.

The "hose-pipe" incident lingered in Cape Town's memory for a long time. Several years after the event an ancient Portuguese cruiser, the *Vasco da Gama*, aroused great interest while she was in Table Bay Docks. She was a museum piece, launched on the Thames in 1876, the oldest man-o'-war still in commission. When she went into dry-dock,

spectators gathered to gaze at her ram, a solid steel spur jutting out about twenty feet from the bows, far below the waterline.

The *Vasco da Gama* went back to the days when naval battles were fought at close quarters. She had an "admiral's walk" over the stern, and two huge funnels out of proportion to her short length. Her armour-plating was nine inches thick in some places. One of my colleagues on the newspaper, a man with a strong and often uncontrollable sense of humour, went over the *Vasco da Gama* and wrote a description which ended with the words: "Her most dangerous weapon is her hose-pipe." This brought the Consul for Portugal into the office and there was an embarrassing interview.

Another incredibly ancient ship, which I visited soon after World War II, was the three-masted barque *Tijuca*. I believe she was the oldest ocean-going ship in the world, launched at Nantes in 1866, an iron ship of about eight hundred tons. Her captain declared that she had been built as the *Jeanne d'Arc* to the order of Napoleon III as a naval training ship; and a fine brass oil-lamp in the saloon was pointed out as the gift of the Empress at the launching ceremony. I am not sure that the captain

was right. Other authorities say that she was designed for the nitrate trade. Lubbock has recorded the fast homeward passage she made in 1901 from Iqueque to St. Pierre in seventy-eight days.

Early this century the *Tijuca* spent her time carrying stores to the whaling stations at South Georgia, returning to Buenos Aires with whale oil. She must have earned better dividends when she was plying between the Plate and the Cape, carrying fertilizers and food to the Union, returning with coal. Her owners had cemented her and fitted her with electricity and radio. Once she carried fifteen tons of butter from the Argentine to relieve a shortage in the Union.

Her cabins were beautifully decorated, and there were many applications for passages in the old ship. The master had quarters that the captain of a modern liner might have envied, and the saloon was panelled in bird's-eye maple with much red plush and cut-glass mirrors. All this splendour vanished beneath the waves. The *Tijuca* foundered in a gale off Rio Grande do Sul in 1946 with a cargo of coal from Cape Town. She was eighty years old.

Such were a few of the ships and men of the old

waterfront I knew, such were the tales I heard. It always brought a wider world to my doorstep, and after all these years I am seldom disappointed when I take my seat on a bollard on Memory Wharf and wait for the world of adventure to come to me. But always in my life there have been times when Memory Wharf has yielded to reality, times when I have set out on my own voyages, hard voyages and soft, and every one of them memorable because I love the sea.

Chapter 15

BEACHCOMBER AT SEA

MY BEACH has been painted out by distance and I am at sea, watching the Cape mountains grow small over the horizon. The time has come to discover other men's beaches and the waterfronts of other cities. I shall return with fresh wealth of memory to walk again on Blaauwberg beach and find the meaning of my voyage.

Voyages are milestones in my life, and I have never forgotten one. Years ago I thought it was romantic to go to sea in small craft, trawlers and whalers and yachts; and indeed I value those memories. But now it is the *Dunnottar Castle*, and I want nothing better. These lilac liners (or is it lavender-grey?) with the scarlet black-topped funnels of the Union-Castle have played a great part in my life. The diaries my mother left me speak of the *Scot*, the old *Tantallon*, the *Raglan Castle* and other fine ships that I never knew. But as a boy I travelled in the slender *Norman*, one of the most graceful of steamers. And I can just remember another old mail boat in which the first-class saloon and cabins were placed aft, as in sailing-ship days. What transformations there have been this century!

I remember the bugler who called us to meals in the old mail boats – and how gladly I went down to a saloon of polished woodwork and swivel chairs. No glassed-in promenade deck protected the passengers of those days. A square of canvas was lashed to stanchions for'ard, and removed in the tropics. Washbasins tipped up, and the stewards were always filling water-tanks and emptying slops. No wireless and no deep-freeze. Some ships had cows, hens and chickens on their poops. It was hot down below in the tropics without the punkah-louvre blowers at work, but I slept on deck and still count those nights under the stars as part of the magic of childhood.

No, there were no hardships, and few people grumbled at the length of the voyage. Intermediates sometimes took more than three weeks, and the mail boats ran from Cape Town to Southampton in seventeen days. Once I spent two months in the Gloucester Castle, seeing all the ports between Cape Town and London by the east coast route, and I was sorry to leave the ship.

I am not greatly interested in ship's entertainments, though no evening will pass without the cinema or tombola, dancing or games. The deck swimming-

bath will tempt me again and again. I shall find pleasure in the exquisite days at sea, the lullaby of the ocean, and the pulse-beat of the engines that sends me to sleep rather too easily.

Why do some people travel by air when they can go this way? I have flown in war and in peace and I know that emergencies may arise in which the air liner becomes a blessing. Yet I persist in regarding air travel as unnatural, unrestful, expensive and on rare occasions nerve-racking. (Little did I know when I wrote these words that soon I should be gazing at the stupendous peaks of the Canary Islands framed in the windows of a Spanish aircraft.) You cannot make friends above the clouds. In spite of clever advertising, the air food cannot approach the marvels planned in a modern liner's kitchen. And finally, my air-minded friends, please tell me what you did with the time you saved. You can't remember? Well, I can remember my ships, the peace and happiness of my voyages.

But I am here not only because of a deep affection for the sea. For months I have been walking on my beach and thinking of far beaches, island beaches washed by this same ocean, yet very different scenes. Sometimes I am drawn to the lonely places

of the earth, the isles where ordinary tourists never step on shore. Then I hanker after foreign harbour lights and taverns where there is life in the music, guitars and tambourines and castanets for the *flamenco* dancers.

This time I shall see the remote places as well as the islands which are so sophisticated that they rank as outposts of Europe. I shall swing by the rope on to the old landing steps at St. Helena again, where friends will be waiting for me. They say there is no sentiment in business, but this shipping company is good to the St. Helena islanders. Every ship stays eight hours, giving the poor island people a chance of driving their ancient taxi-cabs and selling their lace and curios; and some would fare badly if that concession were taken away from them. Everyone from the island is welcome on board ship. But the greatest kindness I saw was shown to a small island boy, a sick and penniless child, who was brought on board in a wheeled chair, bound for London and medical treatment which was beyond the resources of the island hospital. The captain put him into a first-class cabin with a private bath, and I am sure that few children can ever have found more enjoyment in a voyage.

I have a memory of a little room in the Castle at Jamestown, St. Helena, where all the old secrets of the island are preserved. Such old secrets they are that I shall be allowed to open any volume I choose. I have the key now to a page of manuscript which will make the past live again. And there will still be time to stand among the arum lilies and jacaranda at Longwood, under the Tricolour of France. I shall see the green fronds of the tree ferns on Diana's Peak, and linger at the Briars, and look for familiar faces in Main Street, and peer into Lemon Valley before I go.

Then this great volcanic lump, like a rough black castle, will sink back into mid-ocean. Two days later Ascension will appear, a fantastic island, another true oceanic island. The nearest I have come to the stupid folly of ambition in my life has been the desire to see places which are difficult to reach. (Thank heaven I went to Tristan da Cunha twice as a young man, or it would still be worrying me.) Tristan, St. Helena and Ascension form a trio, with one governor and one bishop. Having seen two of these South Atlantic isles I must land on the third, or suffer the agony a stamp-collector knows when he needs only one more to complete a rare

set. In fact, I am not really as juvenile as all that. The lives of men and women in isolation have always had a special interest for me, probably because most of them endure it better than I could. I want to learn why the cable men of Ascension and their wives are so fond of an island which has so little outward charm.

I know the Canary Islands from the sea. Almost every traveller between the Cape and England has stared in wonder at El Teide, the peak of Teneriffe, twelve thousand feet above the sea, snow-capped above the clouds. As a small boy visiting Santa Cruz, the capital, I was shown the bull-ring, the cathedral, the fruit market and the garrotte. This time I must walk not only in Santa Cruz, but in Las Palmas and also in the little-known isles of the group. I have been studying the map too often and the names have taken hold of me ... La Laguna and Bandama Caldera, Arucas and Galdar, Agaete and La Matanza. And shall I see San Sebastian at last, and Valverde? I must see them, so that the map will lose its power and I am no longer under its spell.

Table Mountain has gone now, and the Canary Isles are much in my thoughts – the Fortunate Isles of Homer, the Gardens of the Hesperides, the Isles of

the Blest. I shall see the bananas growing in city streets between white and pink houses with carved doors and wrought-iron grilles. Women with skirts of Spanish red will swing past over the cobblestones. Under a sun umbrella on Las Canteras beach you may find me loafing. That green jungle swaying in the dawn wind; those are the palms of Maspalomas, down in the south of Grand Canary, where camels loiter among the dunes and the land is like the Sahara. Gracious isles are these, with easy-going ways, not yet robbed of all their bewitching laziness by the ugly forms of progress. I admire people who think more of good food and wine and leisure than pesetas; such people as the easy-going Canarios.

But why am I going on later to Madeira? It must be because Madeira has always held a sentimental and romantic place in my memories, vivid as a first love affair. As a small boy I stepped on to foreign soil there for the first time in my life. Ever since then I have watched that green island rising from the sea at intervals of years. And always I longed to stay behind when the lilac Union-Castle liner moved on.

Between all those visits a picture lingered in my mind. Small boats with slim diving boys shouting

for money. Boats loaded with love-birds and screaming parrots, lace and bright fruit, baskets and necklaces and wine. Brown men with red cloths bound over their heads. Those were the days when the mail boat came up in the dawn wind, and I stood entranced while the sunlight flooded over the white villas, the terraced mountains, the green vineyards, the lush bananas and sugar-cane. Books were never enough for me. Madeira was a reality, my first isle of romance, an island that whetted an appetite which has never been sated.

So I have left my beach and I am bound for the islands. And there is one more good reason which made me choose the *Dunnottar Castle* for my voyage. I collect menus that please me, and these menus will be worth having.

This is the traditional English fare of the sort that not everyone in England can afford, varied by French and other Continental dishes. In the storerooms of the *Dunnottar Castle* I am discovering the finest food that Britain can supply; and there are a number of South African items, and some from other lands. Others may visit the bridge and engine-room. I prefer the chef's domain. Usually I start my breakfast with orange juice, as I

do at home, but occasionally I have strawberries and cream for a change. Always I have to remind myself to make a wise choice from a long and tempting first class menu. If I have a Yarmouth bloater then I go without the Limousine omelette, the Scotch collops, the crumbed pork sausages with sauce piquante. But I often take hot Scotch baps. instead of toast. These white and floury morning rolls do not come my way often enough. As a breakfast novelty I can recommend parsnip fritters.

I eat a little more at lunch time. When there are scampis I start with them; those lovely prawns from Dublin Bay, served cold with Sauce Tartare, or fried in butter. Or there may be dressed Hamble crab, served in the huge shell. (I dare not take too much of that ravishing dish.) Fresh haddock, Dover sole, halibut, plaice, codling and whitebait often appear at lunch time. Among my favourite entrees is Italian pie, containing minced beef, onions and mushrooms, covered with decorative Duchesse potatoes and browned in the oven. Essentially English lunch dishes include beefsteak and kidney pudding, a triumph of slow cooking with marvellous suet; and Lancashire hot pot, another speciality that demands a slow oven.

At lunch time there is always an enormous cold buffet, dominated on special occasions by a huge boar's head, and including Melton Mowbray pie, the greatest pork pie in the world. Often I have a couple of slices of Scotch beef with pickled walnuts. A salad that always makes my mouth water is the Mascotte salad, composed of asparagus tips, plovers' eggs, cocks' kidneys, crawfish tails and truffles. That is not served every day.

Now and again I find room for baked apple dumplings and cream. More often I have ice cream and my favourites are Madame Pompadour, a strawberry ice with the centre filled with curacao and a meringue mixture; and Cassata Sicilienne.

Some of the richest treats come at dinner. Though I am no great soup eater there are times when I cannot allow the lentil cream soup to pass by; or the French onion soup with croutons and grated cheese.

Above all fish at dinner I place boiled salmon, the finest fish in the world according to epicures. I do not turn up my nose at Britain's leading fresh water fish, the river trout. We have it fried, grilled and boiled. Here again I am in favour of boiling, or rather simmering with wine, herbs, bay leaves,

celery and cloves.

A Sunday night dinner stands out in my memory. Hors d'oeuvres are followed by real turtle soup. The salmon is grilled, with parsley butter. Asparagus with Mousseline sauce comes next; then fillets of beef garnished with artichoke bottoms filled with macedoine of vegetables, accompanied by sauce bearnaise. That is another difficult sauce, but one of the most popular.

I pass by the saddle of mutton from New Zealand and gaze wistfully at the roast pheasant stuffed with cooked rice, foie-gras and truffles. The cold buffet is a grand array of roast turkey, beef, ox-tongue, liver sausage, terrine of venison and ham with aspic jelly. I leave all that alone, ponder over the almond pudding and coupe d'ananas, and then select a simple vanilla ice. The savoury consists of smoked haddock mixed with cream sauce, cheese and egg yolk.

I am bound for the islands. As I said before, I have wisely selected the right ship for the run. And the right chef.

Chapter 16

ISLE OF ESCAPES

“How far is St. Helena from the field of Waterloo?”

A near way – a clear way – the ship will take you soon.

A pleasant place for gentlemen with little left to do,

(Morning never tries you till the afternoon!)

Rudyard Kipling.

AT FIRST sight you would say that the island of St. Helena must have been a secure prison for all the exiles who were forced to live there. I thought so when I saw the high cliffs out in the South Atlantic, a thousand miles from Africa, more than two thousand miles from South America.

But I was wrong. During a month on the island² I heard tales of old adventures and details of one dramatic escape within living memory. In the Castle I searched the records and found narratives proving that human ingenuity combined with fortitude will

² A full account of St. Helena, past and present, will be found in Lawrence Green's previous book, "There's a Secret Hid Away".

defeat even a mid-ocean stronghold.

On my last night I walked down to the wharf as usual and watched the fishing boats coming home. Charlie Moyce was alive then, an old fisherman who could recite every date in St. Helena's history, declaring that he knew the truth about every event worth remembering. He often boasted that if he had lived in Napoleon's time, and it had been made worth his while, he would have taken Napoleon away under the eyes of the British army and navy. Charlie told me about some of the escapes that had failed, and others that succeeded.

That evening Charlie Moyce pointed to one of the open fishing boats, a narrow-gutted double-ender about thirty feet long. "Old whale boat," remarked Charlie. "You could sail to Brazil in a boat like that, mister, clear away to Brazil and step on shore alive. 'Course, a lot depends on the man who handles her."

They had four tunny fish in the boat and a bunch of the delicate fish called bull's-eye; but they had been out for several days before securing that small catch. I saw them bringing their pitiful equipment on shore. Bamboo spars and tiny jibs made out of

something that was not proper sailcloth. A stone “killick”, most primitive of all anchors. One demijohn for water. All the cats on the wharf made for the remains of the mackerel bait.

Yes, it was true. All through the centuries men had put to sea in boats no larger than that whaler, with or without the bare essentials. And some had survived the ordeal.

One of the first discoveries I made in the archives, a point the historians appear to have missed, was a protest by the chairman of the English East India Company against St. Helena being used as Napoleon’s prison. It seems that the British government had selected the island because foreign shipping could be excluded. The chairman, however, pointed out that his company would not accept any responsibility for Napoleon’s safe custody *as escape would be very easy*. He added a warning that the company’s troops were of the “worst description”. These arguments had no more effect on the government than the famous remark made by Warren Hastings: “St. Helena is too beautiful a spot to be a State Prison.”

As we know, Napoleon found escape only in death.

When he was first sent to the island, however, he was physically fit and capable of descending a cliff. St. Helena is only forty-seven square miles in area, but it has a lonely coastline. Then, as now, there were islanders who knew all the unmapped routes from Longwood to unguarded points on the precipitous coast. Napoleon only needed a guide and a hidden boat with crew.

With a clever guide he could have passed the Longwood sentries on any dark night; it would have been safe and simple in comparison with modern escapes from German prison camps. His boat could have been over the horizon before daybreak, and in the days of sail the skipper might have eluded all pursuers. After that the main hazard would have been the ocean, the South Atlantic which has overwhelmed some and allowed others to live.

When you look at the situation in this light, much of the criticism of Governor Sir Hudson Lowe falls away. Lowe was accused of humiliating Napoleon by imposing petty restrictions and placing too many sentries. However, it should be remembered in his favour that he offered Napoleon the freedom of the island (except Jamestown) provided he would show himself to a British officer twice every twenty-four

hours. Napoleon refused. Only then did Lowe take precautions so that the Elba episode could not be repeated on St. Helena.

I was interested in the island legends concerning Napoleon's attempts to escape. They are, I believe, entirely without foundation. Saul Solomon, the "Merchant King of St. Helena", was supposed to have sent Napoleon a silken ladder rolled up in a teapot. This would have helped him down the cliff to the waiting boat. Then there was the story told by Miss Bagley, official housekeeper at the Castle in 1894, and recorded by Admiral Sir Herbert King-Hall when captain of H.M.S. Magpie. Miss Bagley was thirteen when Napoleon died. She declared that Napoleon almost escaped by hiding in a cask. He was transported by accomplices to the windward side of the island, where an American whaler was standing off and on, ready to pick him up. However, the British troops examined the cask and the plot was discovered.

Two incidents support the English East India Company's view that St. Helena was not a secure prison. Robert Seale, a writer in the company's service, made a chart of the island shortly after Napoleon's death. This chart, and a scale model,

showed that there were more than forty landing places round the coast, whereas the defence authorities were only aware of half that number. Seale proved that he had landed at forty-three different places, often at night, and made his way to the interior of the island.

Another shock for St. Helena's garrison commander came much later, only a few years before World War I. A German gunboat was paying a visit, and the captain was warned against taking photographs of the island's defences. Next day a detachment of German seamen suddenly appeared on the heights of the island, marched down the Side Path road through Jamestown with band playing, and embarked in their boats at the wharf. They had landed unobserved on the windward side and marched right across the island.

With this background, you will not be surprised to hear of successful escapes by slaves, soldiers and other deserters and, early this century, by one Boer prisoner-of-war.

Mutineers were among the pioneers in this desperate game. St. Helena was occupied by the English East India Company three centuries ago.

They had been there for several decades when the island began suffering the hardships of isolation owing to the war with France. Soldiers went hungry and unpaid. Some stowed themselves away in company's ships. Then a clever sergeant named Jackson organised a mutiny, threw all who disagreed with him into the Castle dungeons, and seized a small vessel called the *Francis and Mary*. Before sailing, Jackson and his men secured not only sufficient food and water, but also the company's treasure and other valuables. They carried an experienced master mariner away with them as hostage and to handle the ship. Nothing more is to be found about this episode in the St. Helena records, but it would seem probable that such a well-equipped vessel made port safely.

The next escape was carried out by four time-expired soldiers during the brutal Governor Pyke's term of office early in the eighteenth century. These men, Flurcus, Bates, Poulter and Shoales, had served their time and were entitled to return to England for discharge; but Pyke was unreasonable and refused to let them go. Flurcus, a tailor by trade, studied navigation. One night Flurcus and his companions stole an open boat, provisioned it for a

month, and reached St. Nevis in the West Indies. Pyke was reprimanded by his directors in these words: "It would appear you were too arbitrary in the case of Flurcus and the other three men who ran away with the long boat, because nothing but death was likely to be the reward of that attempt. Flurcus and Shoales came to England and were here last July to justify themselves and to complain of the severities which forced them upon that desperate adventure. By the journal they gave in, which contained a voyage of 1,428 leagues run, it appears Flurcus who kept it is an able mariner."

Indeed he was. The distance in modern reckoning was about four thousand five hundred miles. Nevertheless, a similar feat of seamanship was performed much later that century by an artillery sergeant, six soldiers and a slave named John Fortune. They, too, seized a long boat at night, loaded her with food and water and seven muskets, and disappeared. Everyone on the island was sure they had perished. However, the following year a black St. Helena woman, presumably a servant who had travelled to England with her mistress, returned to the island and declared that she had met several of the deserters in London and heard from them

how they had sailed their open boat to the Brazilian coast. Fortune returned to St. Helena not long afterwards, stating that he had not wanted to escape, but that the deserters had forced him to accompany them.

Many parties of soldiers and slaves escaped from St. Helena in jolly boats, cutters and other small craft during the eighteenth century. I found a note about one of these missing crews which described them as “illiterate men of bad character, and having only a few days’ provisions must inevitably perish”.

Probably the most remarkable (and most ghastly) of the eighteenth century escapes was that organised in 1799 by William McKinnon, a gunner. McKinnon went for long walks with another soldier, John Browne; and one day they were looking out over the ocean from the highest point of the island when McKinnon said that he was tired of being banished from the world and cooped up on a little isle. “I would run any risk to return to Britain,” he declared.

Browne agreed to escape with him, and four other soldiers joined them – Samuel McCuin, Charles Brighthouse, William Parr and Terence Conway. Parr

had been a sailor before joining the army. He was a man of “pleasing person and address”; and he suggested that Captain Lelar of the American whaler Columbia, then in harbour, might be willing to help them.

The captain offered to carry all six men away with him. One night the six deserters rowed out towards the Columbia in a dinghy, stopping on the way to take a whaleboat from the moorings. This theft had been decided upon to divert suspicion from the Columbia. No sooner had they boarded the whale boat, however, than they heard the noise of drums on shore and saw lanterns passing along the lines towards the sea-gate; and having guilty consciences they made up their minds that their escape had been detected.

Parr told them it would be necessary to put to sea and wait for the Columbia, Captain Lelar was consulted, and he agreed. Parr borrowed a quadrant, a chart, pen, ink and paper, in case any navigation became necessary; and Captain Lelar supplied them with a keg of water and twenty-five pounds of bread in a bag. The boat had in her a coil of rope and five oars, but no sails. She was leaking, and the six men baled with their hats. Then they rowed to

sea on a course agreed upon and awaited the American whaler. She never showed up.

Parr told the deserters it was no use hanging about. They made a sail from their handkerchiefs and steered for Ascension. There they thought it would be possible to live on turtle and pose as shipwrecked mariners when a vessel arrived. Browne stated before a court of inquiry two years later: "Thus detached from society, steering a doubtful course and uncertain of the event, we beheld our final sea-store daily diminish and meagre famine seemed to approach with all its terrors."

They had left St. Helena on June the tenth. After eight days at sea they observed flights of birds, but of Ascension Island there was no sign. Parr then said they must have passed the Island, and set a new course, west by north, for Rio de Janeiro. They made a spritsail with their shirts. In view of the distance to be covered Parr reduced the rations for each man to one ounce of bread and two mouthfuls of water every twenty-four hours.

"To pass the time and take our minds off the ordeal we spoke of the solaces of city life, the delights of

youth and the friends we would see when we reached England," recalled Browne. All the bread had been eaten fifteen days after leaving St. Helena. McQuin chewed some bamboo, and the others followed his example. Browne was steering one night when he remembered hearing of people eating leather. He spat out the first piece of his shoe, then tried the inside sole; and finding it tasted better he distributed the rest among his comrades. "But we found no benefit from it," he added.

Parr caught a dolphin when they were three weeks out, just in time to save their lives. "We all fell on our knees and thanked God for his goodness to us," Browne said. They tore up the fish, hung it up to dry, found that it agreed with them and lived on it for the next four days. Then hunger gnawed at them again, and Parr, Brighthouse, Conway and Browne decided that the only way to end the misery was to scuttle the boat. The other two objected, saying that God, who had made man, always found him something to eat.

"We scarcely ventured to speak to one another," Browne reported. "So feeble were we that after the slightest exertion in managing the boat our limbs were covered with a cold sweat."

July the fifth found them in such a pitiful state that McKinnon suggested casting lots for one of them to die so that the rest might be saved. All agreed, but Parr was excluded from the lottery as he had developed “spotted fever” two days previously. Parr wrote the numbers and put them in a hat. The others drew them out blindfolded and put them in their pockets. Only then was it agreed that the man holding number five should bleed himself to death. McKinnon, the man who had started this dreadful gamble, had the fatal number. He kept his word.

At daybreak on July the eighth Browne noticed that the sea had changed colour; soon afterwards land appeared right ahead. Heavy surf was breaking on the shore, and they were too weak to handle the boat properly. The boat capsized, McQuin and Brighthouse were drowned, and Parr, Conway and Browne were washed up on the beach.

They were in Brazil, and Indians living in a hut on the beach took a message to the nearest officials. The governor of the district gave them milk and rice to eat, but Browne remarked: “As we had taken no food for a considerable time we were jawlocked, and continued so for fourteen days.”

Meanwhile the survivors had concocted a story. They were taken along the coast to St. Salvador, and there Parr informed the governor that he had been master of the ship *Sally of Liverpool*, which had foundered. The people of St. Salvador were so impressed by Parr and his companions, and the story of the open boat voyage after the imaginary shipwreck, that they raised a fund and presented each man with the equivalent of two hundred pounds. Parr and Conway then sailed for Europe. Browne was left in hospital in Rio de Janeiro.

When Browne recovered, Captain Elphistone of H.M.S. *Diadem* impressed him into the navy and sent him to the Cape station. At last Browne confessed that he was a deserter from St. Helena. “I wished to relate my sufferings to the men of the garrison and to deter others from so mad a scheme,” ended Browne’s evidence. He was treated leniently, his desertion was overlooked, and the first homeward-bound East Indiaman carried him away from St. Helena for the last time.

The story ended happily for Browne, but the St. Helena records contain a grim echo of the open-boat tragedy; nothing less than a note written by McKinnon not long before he cut his wrists. It read:

“My spirits languish, my hopes fail, yet still are my kindred and friends dear to my heart. Must I perish with hunger in this watery desert? When I look around and behold the pale faces and ghastly eyes of my fellow sufferers methinks they reproach me as the cause of their calamities. Yes, it was in consequence of my persuasions that they fled from their duty, from society and plenty.”

Colonel Robert Tatton, a hard-working but unlucky governor, was ruling St. Helena in 1806 when three foreign officers arrived from Cape Town as prisoners-of-war. The records describe them as “French or Spanish”, and with the same vagueness it seems to have been taken for granted that they were on parole. The company had just received and fitted out a nice little brig, the *Jolly Tar*, for service between St. Helena and African ports.

Mr. Sweete, the mate, was in charge of the *Jolly Tar* one night when suddenly he found himself surrounded by men with bayonets. A little later the attackers killed him and threw the body overboard. Mr. Lees, another officer, was wounded in three places, but spared so that he could navigate the ship. The cables were cut, and next morning the *Jolly Tar* was out of sight of the island. Eleven days

later they met a Portuguese brig. Lees was transferred, and returned to St. Helena by way of Rio de Janeiro. He said the leaders of the “pirates” were the three foreign officers, and that they had fourteen soldiers of the garrison with them. The *Jolly Tar* (like the *Francis* and *Mary*) never saw St. Helena again.

Not until the end of last century was another ship seized in the St. Helena anchorage and taken to sea. This time the fugitives were three artillerymen, and the vessel was the small schooner *Luna*, owned by the Solomon firm and used for carrying fresh water out to ships.

Before leaving their military duties the men locked a sentry in the cells and filled the guard report with humorous remarks. They rowed off to the *Luna* with three carbines, ammunition, bread, oatmeal, tinned meat and a map on which they had ruled a course from St. Helena to South America.

At three next morning a night-watchman saw that the *Luna* was sailing out of the anchorage, and took a boat out to investigate. As he approached the slow old schooner, shots were fired over his head and he put back. When daylight came the *Luna* was

becalmed and the three runaways amused themselves by firing at the fort where they had been stationed. Their comrades had to keep their heads below the parapet to avoid being hit. No one on shore cared to tackle the armed men in the *Luna*, and it looked as though the stolen ship would sail away in full view of the whole, shocked population of Jamestown.

When a breeze came up, however, the soldiers were unable to handle the ship under sail. Very soon they became seasick. At last all three dropped into a small boat which they were towing astern and pulled for the shore. They were arrested, of course, and the *Luna* was brought back to her moorings. At the court-martial, two of the men were sentenced to one year's hard labour, and the third man received eighty-four days.

Soon afterwards came the South African War. More than five thousand Boer prisoners-of-war went into camp on St. Helena. These fighters from the veld were not seafaring men, and most of them put all thought of escape out of their heads. It seemed impossible. They settled down to pass the time as best they could with painting, wood-carving and other hobbies; and they made curios which are still

treasured in thousands of South African homes.

However, four men led by Commandant P. Eloff (a grandson of President Kruger) hoarded provisions. One day they took possession of a small, open fishing boat at Sandy Bay with the idea of rowing back to South Africa! They were arrested before they could get clear of the beach. This was just as well, for the boat was rotten and broke in half soon afterwards.

Another attempt was made by two Frenchmen who had been serving with the Boer forces. They swam out from Rupert's Bay with the idea of slipping on board a ship in the harbour and stowing themselves away; but the men on watch in the guard ship spotted them and they were caught.

One man, as I have said, succeeded in outwitting all the guards and leaving the island. He was Commandant A. Smorenburg, a tall Hollander who had settled in the Transvaal in the 'eighties of last century and had served as a policeman and detective.

Smorenburg formed his escape plan when he overheard a British officer telling someone that he was sending a case of Boer curios to his address in

England. Very soon Smorenburg obtained a crude packing case, and enlarged it so that he could sit inside with provisions and water. The case finally measured four feet in length, two feet one inch in height and two feet broad. Smorenburg consigned it to the address in Gloucester, England, of the officer commanding Deadwood Camp in St. Helena, knowing that this officer had already forwarded several cases of curios to his home, and hoping that one more would not arouse suspicion.

The case was marked: "Boer curios – this side up with care." But Smorenburg took the precaution of fitting the case with three doors so that he could let himself out whatever the position of the case might be in the ship's hold. The doors were disguised with iron bands which appeared to be clamped round the corners.

Smorenburg had decided to allow himself to be loaded on board the Union-Castle intermediate steamer Goth, which was to call at Ascension and Las Palmas after leaving St. Helena for England. He hoped to land at Las Palmas, where the ship was to load bananas, and then make his way to Holland. To be on the safe side he allowed himself food and water for twenty days. Army biscuits, bully beef,

MacConnachie's rations and jam were packed in a bag weighing fifteen pounds, and fastened to the floor in such a way that he could rest his knees on it when reclining. Water was carried in two tin containers specially moulded to fit round his chest, and he had several military water bottles as well. A few empty bottles and containers completed the equipment of the packing-case. A censor's seal should have been affixed, but this was not available and Smorenburg took the risk of going without it.

It was on December 20, 1901, that the packing-case (with only the food and water inside) was taken to the hospital in Deadwood Camp and loaded on to an ambulance bound for the wharf at Jamestown. This clever piece of trickery was achieved by J. W. Smorenburg, nephew of the escaper, who acted as his uncle's orderly. The plan almost came to grief, however, on the way down the steep valley road to Jamestown. The ambulance was simply a mule cart, and the driver managed to upset it and the packing-case landed in a ditch. Fortunately it did not break open. No one on the wharf suspected anything, and the case was left outside with a pile of baggage belonging to a detachment of Royal Marines who were going to Ascension.

Commandant Smorenburg had a parole pass which enabled him to leave Deadwood Camp during the daylight hours on four days a week. This was an embarrassment to him, for he was unwilling to break his parole. However, the parole did not apply at night, and in the early hours of December 21 he slipped through the sentries at Deadwood Camp and reached the wharf. To his dismay he could not locate his box.

It looked as though the plan had failed. Smorenburg was a most determined man, however, and he made up his mind to search the lighters offshore before giving up the attempt. A man-o'-war in harbour was using her searchlight intermittently, and Smorenburg had to avoid the beams as he swam away from the wharf. The first lighter was empty, but he was delighted to find his box under the tarpaulin in the second lighter. He pulled out the pegs which held each door in position, crept inside, and secured everything. The discomfort of wet clothes was forgotten in the excitement when he realised that the first stage of his escape had been successful. Then, exhausted after his long swim, he fell asleep.

Smorenburg awoke to the rattle of winches. They were hoisting the cargo out of the lighter, and the

packing-case of "Boer curios" landed on the deck of the Goth with a crash, but without breaking open. Then it was man-handled, turned over and over and lowered into the baggage-room. Some hours later the hatch was closed. Then the engines started and Smorenburg decided that it would be safe to leave the box. This was difficult, for it had been placed upside down among the marines' kit-bags. However, Smorenburg lit a candle which he had in his pocket and crawled out at last.

His first task was to move his packing-case, and the kit and heavy cases surrounding it, so that he could slip into his hiding place at a moment's notice and come out without being trapped. This was hot work, and it had to be done as silently as possible. By the time Smorenburg had arranged everything to his satisfaction he was suffering from a raging thirst, and drank more of his fresh water supply than he could really afford.

Seamen entered the baggage-room next day and moved some of the cases without disturbing Smorenburg in any way. The next day was Christmas Eve, and Smorenburg could hear the passengers singing on deck. The ship slowed down early on Christmas Day, and Smorenburg knew she

was approaching the Ascension Island anchorage. He had been in the habit of sitting under a ventilator and sleeping on the floor of the baggage room; for although the whole compartment was hot, his packing case was almost intolerable. When the anchor went down, however, Smorenburg had to take cover. The hatch was removed and all the Ascension baggage was hauled out. When the hatch was closed Smorenburg felt that he was safe.

Perhaps he would have reached Las Palmas and escaped but for the newly-laid cable between Ascension and St. Helena. Smorenburg had been missed at roll-call on the day after his departure, and the fact that the Goth had just left the island provided an obvious clue. It also seems probable that when the hue and cry was raised, some prisoner-of-war gave away the story of the packing-case. At all events a cable was sent to the naval captain in command of Ascension Island instructing him to have the case of "Boer curios" opened.

Thus the unhappy Smorenburg heard the baggage-room hatch being removed for a second time. He hurried back into his case, and saw through the peep-hole an officer and a number of seamen coming down the ladder. The officer was Mr. John

Attwood, who retired in 1934 as captain of the Balmoral Castle. "I was so overcome with excitement and despair that I grabbed and drained two bottles of water," Smorenburg told his friends. Attwood rapped on the case, and Smorenburg called weakly: "Stop! I'll come out."

Dr. Paisley, surgeon of the Goth, who examined Smorenburg that morning, remarked: "I think Jonah in the whale's belly had a more comfortable time than Smorenburg."

Smorenburg was in a fainting condition when he reached the deck. Attwood revived him with a brandy and soda, followed by a bath and eggs and bacon and coffee. He was sent back to St. Helena (with the packing-case as evidence) in H.M.S. *Gibraltar*. A court of inquiry was held, and Smorenburg was imprisoned in High Knoll fort, reserved for "turbulent Boers", until peace was signed. He had not broken his parole, and was not charged with any such offence. That was just as well, for an officer who breaks his parole as a prisoner-of-war is liable to the death penalty.

Smorenburg's box and a number of documents bearing on the escape were presented by the

Governor of St. Helena to the Africana Museum in Johannesburg some years ago. Smorenburg, I may add, became a motor-car licensing officer for the Johannesburg municipality, a sworn translator for the Supreme Court, and a Justice of the Peace.

“Time heals all wounds,” wrote Smorenburg in a letter to Captain Attwood not long before World War II. “I bear no grudge or ill-will against anyone. If the present unsettled world conditions should unfortunately result in war my services, if required, are at the disposition of the British Commonwealth of which my country forms a part.”

Chapter 17

ASCENSION ISLAND

ASCENSION IS a grim, unlovely island with an atmosphere as weird as anything you will find on the face of the oceans. It has seen much suffering, many tragedies. Yet those who live there now will tell you in all sincerity that it is one of the happiest isles in the world, a place they are in no hurry to leave. Their strange affection puzzled me for a long time.

Passengers in liner after liner have gasped at the sight of this lonely and desolate volcanic cinder in mid-South Atlantic, and they have steamed away thanking God that they were not being left behind. Here, you would imagine, a castaway would have died of thirst in the days before the island became inhabited. And you would be right.

I, too, failed to perceive the spell of Ascension; but when a place baffles me I become all the more determined to wring the secret out of it. This was not easy. Thanks to the Governor of St. Helena and the Union-Castle Line, however, I was able to land twice on the island. Thanks to the cable men and their wives, who voyaged with me and talked of

their island years, I believe I know the secret now.

You must have two special permits to visit Ascension, one from the master of your ship and the other from the Governor of St. Helena or the Ascension magistrate. The captain has to keep an eye on the weather, for the notorious rollers may come up while you are on shore and then you may be marooned on the island until the next ship calls. Thus the privilege of landing is seldom granted.

Only the occasional eccentric like myself wishes to go on shore there. "I saw a land not lying before me smiling in beauty, but staring in all its naked hideousness," wrote Charles Darwin when he gazed upon the Ascension landscape. He could not discover a tree anywhere. A later American visitor summed up the scene as "Hell with the fire put out".

Ascension consists of the summits of forty small, extinct volcanoes. The shape gives a very rough impression of a bell, twenty miles round the rim and rising to nearly three thousand feet where Green Mountain peak thrusts into the clouds. It is a fantastic mass of cinders, streams of black lava and sand, weird hills and volcanic craters. Geologists

say the island is fifty thousand years old, a very recent arrival above the surface. (St. Helena, regarded as a “sister” island, is possibly the oldest ocean island in the world.) Ascension is still almost naked, and many more thousands of years must pass before it is properly clothed. Devil’s Ashpit, Devil’s Punchbowl, Devil’s Riding School and Dead Man’s Cove; these are sinister names. Dust and lava, scorpions and mosquitoes; a desert island indeed, a hideous, sunbaked wilderness.

Ascension, this weird Ascension, reminds me that the cable service has never brought forth an author to reveal to the world a life that remains hidden as though behind a curtain of secrecy. These men, and their wives, spend years in strange and sometimes romantic isolation. Their exile may be pleasant, it may be an ordeal; often and often the elements of drama must be present. Yet not a word comes out. For years last century, all this century, the submarine cables have been spreading out along the trade routes, linking remote atolls and ocean islands and the cities of the world. Cable men have been stationed all along those routes, and they lived through all sorts of vicissitudes. They have known joy and sorrow and appalling loneliness, and

survived dangers. In their messes they have discussed the most fantastic experiences. But not one of them has put it down for posterity. What do you find in the “Zodiac”, the magazine of the cable service? Search the whole set, and you will find little more than descriptions of dinners and cricket matches and a few travel pieces admirably illustrated with photographs. I once met Edgar Middleton, a former cable operator who wrote a play called “Potiphar’s Wife” and made eighty thousand pounds. But he never drew on his memories of life on a cable station for that or any other work. Never have I encountered such neglect of such a magnificent theme.

So here is Ascension, one of those lonely cable stations which no one has dramatised, an island with a great question-mark hovering over its barren shores. It was on Ascension Day in 1501 that Juan de Nova sighted the clouds massing round the peak. He sailed up into the shallows and anchored. Certainly he and his men were the first human beings to set foot there; and possibly they left the goats, mentioned by many visitors, to serve as food for castaways.

Before long Ascension (like Table Bay) became

known as a pillar-box of the ocean. Friar Navarette, a late seventeenth century caller, remarked: "Sailors of all nations are in the habit of leaving letters here, sealed up in a bottle and placed in a certain hole in the rock. Letters are taken away by the first ship that passes in the opposite direction." A beacon on the south-easterly point of Ascension marks the spot, and it is still known as Letter-Box.

All the very early callers were Portuguese, and they made a track up the mountain. This path can still be traced, from North-East Bay to the summit. They may also have placed the wooden cross on the present Cross Hill, overlooking Georgetown. One manuscript (which I found among the log-books and diaries of old Ascension in the British Museum library in London) suggested that a sailor had been buried there with the large cross above his grave.

Britain did not take possession of Ascension until 1816, but British ships called at the island for a century and more before that date. Struys, a Dutch writer, said that in 1673 the English were using Ascension as a rendezvous. "The whole island," Struys reported, "is white with the dung of mews, cormorant and a sort of wild geese that come thither to breed and also to prey upon the dead fish which

lie in heaps upon the shore."

Just two centuries after the discovery the first castaways lived on Ascension. They were Dampier and his men; William Dampier the former buccaneer returning from a voyage of discovery round the coasts of Australia on behalf of the British Admiralty. His ship, the two-decker *Roebuck*, had sprung a leak and the pumps could not cope with it. Dampier had to beach his ship on the south-east coast of the island, between Pumice Cove and Pillar Bay. (Timbers and spars, black with age, were discovered there in recent years, probably relics of the *Roebuck*.) Then he sent his men ashore on a raft with their chests and bedding.

Dampier had time to order the sails to be unbent for use as tents. He also saved a puncheon and a thirty-six gallon cask of fresh water, and a bag of rice. Unfortunately there were thieves among the crew of fifty, and some of the precious stores vanished. They suffered from thirst, but on the sixth day Dampier saw the goats in a valley and followed one to the "drip" which is known to this day as Dampier's Springs. Here the rain is held by a layer of clay and led over a moss-covered rock where maidenhair fern grows. It is no more than a trickle,

but it saved Dampier and his men.

Half-way up Green Mountain is Dampier's Cave, where the castaways lived on land-crabs, sea-birds, turtles and goats. According to island tradition, Dampier buried a treasure near the cave. Many a hopeful naval expedition, many cable exiles have searched for that treasure, but always in vain. If you go back (as I did) to Dampier's own account of the loss of the *Roebuck* you will find no mention of treasure. Dampier complained that he lost his own books and papers after beaching the ship. That was his only serious grievance. He described a tree which he found with a carving: an anchor and cable and the year 1642. After forty days on Ascension they were all taken off by three British men-o'-war and an East Indiaman. Dampier, of course, was in command of the expedition a few years later which marooned Alexander Selkirk (Robinson Crusoe) on Juan Fernandez, and was again in command when the castaway was picked up after five years.

Ascension's next castaway died but told his tale in a diary found beside his skeleton. It was a quarter of a century after the Dampier episode that Captain Mawson of the British ship *Compton* landed and found the bones and the grim message. (This was

another Ascension relic which I studied in the British Museum library.) The diarist, evidently a seaman, had been marooned on Ascension as punishment for some grievous offence which he failed to describe. They left him a Bible, a tent, a cask of water, a little wine, a hatchet, two buckets, an old frying-pan, a fowling-piece without ammunition, a tea-kettle, onions, peas, rice, and salt.

Very soon the ordeal began. Finding himself in a desert, the castaway was reluctant to consume his own small larder. "I feel great dread and uneasiness, having no hopes remaining but that the Almighty God would be my Protector," he wrote. He climbed a hill in the hope of sighting a ship or seeing food in any shape, but he was rewarded only with a "raging hunger". On the hill summit he left his useless gun with his shirt made fast to it as a tiny signal of distress.

After a time he succeeded in killing a few seabirds, which he skinned, salted and dried in the sun. Turtle helped him to vary his diet, but never did any man find less enjoyment in the noble flesh. The need for a supply of fresh water was always on his mind, and before long he went inland to the south carrying a

few onions. All he found was a growth like purslane, which he ate, and some other roots and green herbs which he was afraid to eat.

On his return to the beach he planted the remaining onions, hoping for a crop. The diary reveals that his mind was wandering. Often he saw apparitions, and it is impossible to follow his routes over the island. One passage, however, reads clearly enough: "I found a turtle with whole eggs and flesh and made an excellent dinner, boiling the eggs with some rice. The remainder I buried for fear the stench should offend me, the turtles being of so large a size that it is impossible for one man to eat a whole one while sweet."

He fished without success. On one expedition he found a hollow place with a stream of fresh water (probably Dampier's Springs), but it seems that he lost it again. His shoes were worn out, crossing the clinker, and his feet were cut severely. This may have accounted for his failure to return to the water. At all events the last pages of the diary refer to his "great thirst" which could not be quenched with seabirds' eggs or turtle blood. Here is the end of the miserable castaway's story. "I am become a moving skeleton, my strength is entirely decayed, I cannot

write much longer. I sincerely repent of the sins I committed and pray henceforth no man may suffer the misery I have undergone. For the sake of others I leave this narrative behind me to deter mankind from following such diabolical inventions. I now resign my soul to Him that gave it, hoping for mercy in ..."

Captain Cook brought the *Resolution* to Ascension during his great voyage in search of the unknown "Southland" late in the eighteenth century. He, too, was repelled by the bleak landscape. "The dreariness of this island surpassed all the horrors of Easter Island and Tierra del Fuego, even without the alliance of snow," Cook remarked. "It was a ruinous heap of rocks."

Cook's men found a wreck on the east coast of the island, a ship which had been on fire and had been beached. "The distressful situation to which such a set of men must have been reduced in this barren island, before a ship could take them up, drew an expression of pity even from the sailors," Cook wrote. Cook was short of fuel, however, and he took on timber from the wreck to keep his galley stoves alight. He also captured twenty-four turtle, which lasted his ship's company for three weeks.

Ascension became a British colony and a permanent settlement at the same period as Tristan da Cunha, and for the same reason. Napoleon was a prisoner on St. Helena, and islands which might have been used by Napoleon's friends as bases for an escape plot were seized and garrisoned. Thus, in 1815, law and order came to the isle of turtles in the shape of two British men-o'-war, *Peruvian* and *Zenobia*. They landed a twelve-pounder carronade, and left young Lieutenant Cuppage there with a sloop's crew. One year later the island was formally commissioned as H.M.S. *Ascension*. But the settlement became known as "Garrison" because the garrison lived there, and the name has stuck in spite of the later, more dignified title of Georgetown.

Garrison looked like an African village in the early years, with a stone tenement for officers, tents for seamen and marines, hovels for the Kroomen from West Africa. Rain was collected in casks and iron tanks. Apparently the hardships were known at the Admiralty, for the captain was granted a special allowance of four shillings a day.

After the death of Napoleon the Admiralty decided to abandon Tristan, but to retain Ascension as a

sanatorium for the crews of men-o'-war who were operating against the slavers along the fever-stricken shores of West Africa. The island served the purpose well except on those tragic occasions when ships brought the deadly yellow fever with them. "Sores heal rapidly, fractures unite quickly, inflammatory complaints are not obstinate, and everyone enjoys uninterrupted good health," reported a naval officer of that period.

Captain H. E. Brandreth of the Royal Engineers, who surveyed the island in 1829, was responsible for the amenities which made life worth living. He not only planned the defence, but also designed the water scheme. Water has been precious on Ascension ever since Dampier nearly died of thirst. Seldom has there been too much of it, for heavy rain falls in the settlement only at intervals of years. Rivers may run like the wadis of Egypt for a day, but then the greedy clinker absorbs every drop.

At first the garrison used water brought from St. Helena and other places in barrels, as the rainfall and Dampier's Spring never supplied enough. Brandreth built a catchment area like the Gibraltar scheme on a small scale, and the pipe-line from Green Mountain to Garrison was laid. It was never

possible to supply much water to ships. Sun condensers were used at one time, and a plant came later for distilling a couple of thousand gallons of fresh water a day from the sea. Anyone who wanted his laundry done had to supply the water out of his day's ration.

Brandreth also bored in a ravine, penetrated a bed of lava, and made a well that yielded a thousand gallons a day for some time. The well dried up and was forgotten, and a later attempt to revive this source failed. Some believe there is an underground river at Ascension. Sounds as of running water are heard, but this water, if it exists, has never been brought to the surface.

I came across Brandreth's own description of Ascension in an old report. Some of the marines employed on the farm had their wives with them, and Brandreth found a little red-cheeked Devonshire woman living in a cave at Dampier's Springs. Her husband had scooped out a parlour and bedroom, each eight feet square, plastered and whitewashed and with canvas on the floors.

"People rarely complain of life on the island," Brandreth declared. "The secret is found in constant

occupation, the brilliance and elasticity of the atmosphere, the remarkable salubrity, and the good sense, tact, judgment and temper of the commandant."

But the shadow of yellow fever always lay across the early settlement. Malaria claimed some, but others recovered. Yellow fever could not be treated in those days. So today Ascension is an island of cemeteries. Many a grave recalls those tragic years when the old gunboats anchored there with fever-racked crews under awnings, and buried their dead by the dozen. One such ship, H.M.S. *Bann*, arrived in 1823 with yellow fever on board. The disease was passed on to the shore garrison, and one-third of the people died. Only sixteen of the *Bann's* crew survived.

This lesson was not forgotten. When the stricken H.M.S. *Bonetta* arrived in the middle of last century, no member of her company was allowed in the settlement. *Bonetta* anchored opposite a landing known as Comfort Cove, and all hands landed. There they died, one by one, some digging graves for their shipmates and then scooping out their own graves before they became too weak. Every day the men of the garrison left food and water close at

hand, but they could not save the *Bonetta's* men. Last to die was the *Bonetta's* surgeon. He cared for his patients to the end, and he was found dead in the shallow grave he had made for himself. They changed the name of the place after that. Modern charts show it as Comfortless Cove.

Captains of H.M.S. *Ascension* had almost unlimited power during the long decades when the island was as isolated as any ship at sea. (Today the cable manager also acts as magistrate; but the cable linking the island with St. Helena and the outside world limits his authority to some extent.) A captain of last century was not only in command of the "stone frigate". Visitors found that he was also governor, sole legislator, chief executioner, dockyard superintendent, coroner, public prosecutor, jailer, and president ex-officio of all local societies, the canteen, library and sports club. As a rule the commander was a naval officer, but officers of the Royal Marines also held the post.

One such potentate was handed an official document by the surgeon reporting the arrival of a baby. This stern disciplinarian added the word "approved", and his initials. For a long time babies born "on board" H.M.S. *Ascension* were deemed to

have been born at sea, and their births were registered in the parish of Wapping.

Wives of naval officers did not always live in harmony. Not all of them were willing to take precedence according to the ranks of their husbands; even the front pews in church were contested until a wise captain decreed: "Let age take the higher place." I have an extract from the Admiralty Gazette describing the wretched state of affairs in Georgetown at the end of last century, when ten officers' wives formed cliques and would not speak to their rivals for months on end. When some matter had to be settled, they wrote letters. The wives of petty officers and marine non-commissioned officers were far more human, and the cottages where they lived are still called "Harmony Row".

One captain was advised to try the experiment of punishing the husbands for the sins of their wives. He made inquiries and then rejected the idea. Some of the wives would have loved to have seen their husbands suffer. This captain finally resigned his appointment in despair, pointing out that he could handle any ship afloat, but not the womenfolk of H.M.S. *Ascension*.

Naturally, the queer life of Ascension was not easily imagined by those who had never seen the place. Long ago the wife of a naval captain stepped on to the jetty and inquired: "Where is Government House – and the Governor's carriage?"

"Yonder is the captain's cottage, ma'am, and here is the island cart," replied a seaman politely.

Mrs Gill, wife of an Astronomer Royal, spent six months on Ascension with her husband eighty years ago in an effort to fix the true distance of the earth from the sun. She found housekeeping difficult. When she went to the bakery they gave her a stale loaf. A bell rang at seven in the morning and everyone ran out for a tiny ration of fresh milk from the mountain. "Vegetables?" she asked. "Only sweet potatoes, and none of those till next Friday," was the answer.

"Where shall I find the butcher?" Mrs Gill inquired.

"There ain't any butcher," replied the cook with a grin. "The sheep and bullocks are starving for food and water, and hardly any are killed that have not fainted first."

"But surely there are plenty of fish?" persisted Mrs Gill. "Generally, ma'am, but not when the rollers

are in." Ascension has watched many dramas of the sea. Men in open boats have sighted the peak with dry throats and thankful hearts. Many a slaver was brought there as a prize, and many a negro stepped on shore at Ascension as a free man. So many West Africans were living there at one time that a "suburb" of Garrison was known as Krootown.

Two men-o'-war which lay for years in the anchorage at Ascension were H.M.S. *Tortoise* and H.M.S. *Flora*. It was in 1844 that the *Tortoise* arrived as permanent guard ship, and she swung at her moorings there (latterly as a coal hulk) until early this century. *Flora* became guard ship in 1865, and was transferred to Simonstown as depot ship seven years later.

Flora nearly came to grief at Ascension. She was lying there one night, an unrigged frigate with many sick naval ratings from West Africa on board, when her mooring cable snapped. Slowly she drifted before the south-east trade wind. For a time no one noticed the movement; but at last someone remarked that the lights of the settlement were growing faint. They dropped anchor just before the ship reached deep water. She remained at anchor on the island shelf, and was brought to safety later.

Flora had very little food and water on board. If she had been blown away from the island, the officer in command on shore would have had no seaworthy vessel to send after her. In those days before wireless *Flora's* crew and the invalids would probably have perished.

Tortoise was evidently capable of putting to sea during one critical period when Ascension almost dried up. All hands were in danger of dying of thirst; but *Tortoise* made sail, headed south for St. Helena, and returned in great haste with her holds filled with barrels of water. She cannot have been a fast ship with a name like *Tortoise*, but she got back in time.

Britain almost abandoned Ascension in 1881, and the useless garrison of five hundred Royal Marines was withdrawn. The place was costing forty thousand pounds a year, and it was no more than an occasional coaling station. Germany tried to secure the island a decade later, offering South West Africa in exchange. However, the British Admiralty objected. The island was left with a very small garrison during World War I, although an attack by a German raider seemed probable. Soon afterwards the Admiralty decided to “axe” H.M.S. *Ascension*

in the same way that other units of the Royal Navy had been dealt with. Finally, in 1922, the White Ensign was hauled down and the Eastern Telegraph Company's manager became magistrate and ruler of the island.

Memories of the Royal Navy cling to every corner of Garrison, just as they do in Simonstown. The long occupation is ineradicable. All buildings in Garrison and on the mountain are still owned by the Admiralty, and let to the cable people on indefinite lease. Names such as Bunghole Square, in the middle of the settlement, recall the days when rum casks were handled there. I found Admiralty Cottage in ruins, eaten by white ants. Years ago it was the lovely home of the naval captain on Cross Hill. Once I met a doctor who had taken over the hospital from the naval surgeon when the navy departed; and in that hospital he found an operating table that went right back to Nelson's day, a fearsome, blood-stained board with rings so that the terrified patients could be lashed in position, while arms or legs were sawn off without an anaesthetic.

A brass port light from some forgotten man-o'-war supplies the red light outside the police station. (The navy also put up a jail which remains empty

nowadays for years at a time.) In little St. Mary's Church, which the navy built in 1843, there are tablets on the walls in memory of seamen who were killed at sea; seamen who fell on Green Mountain; seamen who died while serving on the island. And I remember the little baptismal font of grey Ascension limestone, where so many of the island's babies have been christened.

Many of the bungalows in Garrison were built a hundred years ago, and re-built by cable officials with bricks made from lava. I found them charming. Always the main room is the open veranda, shaded by jalousies, but open to the endless sweep, sweep, sweep of the south-east trade wind. Without that breeze life on Ascension would be intolerable. Now and again the wind swings round and blows from West Africa. They call that a "Coaster", for it is a hot and damnable wind; and everyone feels irritable until the comforting south-east trade comes again.

In the bungalows are pieces of furniture now becoming antiques of a sort, the standard mahogany furniture which the old Eastern Telegraph Company supplied to its exiles in far places ... wardrobes, chests-of-drawers, great sideboards bearing the company's crest. Kitchens have paraffin

refrigerators, blue flame and pressure stoves.

Cable people live outside most of the time. Meals are served on the veranda, and many sleep on the veranda. It is a place for the happiest possible sun downer parties, with little polished, dusted tables every-where and pink gins and snacks and curios such as only cable men can gather during their years of service in the queer outposts of the globe. Yes, a place where tales are told as the sun goes down, tales of life in the solitudes that only the cable men know.

Each house in Garrison now has a forty-gallon water-tank, and in these days of a small population each person is allowed seven gallons a day. When I landed for the second time in April, 1957, the island had been suffering from a drought. One tank on the mountain had run dry. The whole supply would have lasted for another twenty days; and then rain fell on Green Mountain.

In the later naval days a windmill pumped salt water to a tower and every household enjoyed salt water baths. This vanished pleasure is still spoken of with regret.

Green Mountain is the paradise of this weird island

world. As you drive out from Georgetown, away from the brave little bath-watered gardens of bougainvillea and Cape daisies, petunias and zinnias; as you enter the ferocious lava wastes it seems unlikely that the island can relent and offer a normal picture of beauty. Six miles to the summit, and the first half of the journey shows you only the craters, the sharp clinker that cuts your shoes to pieces, the sullen hills, the red, black and grey dust; and the once-molten lava, set just as it was when it stopped flowing, in wave after wave. Men have been lost in this lava desert, and found delirious and half dead from thirst.

I walked away from the jeep at “One Boat”, listening to the sound of my feet on the brittle clinker, the clinker that rings like broken china. Has the whole island been explored? I doubt it. There must be far corners cut off by fissures and inaccessible owing to the jagged, universal clinker. At night the clinker shrinks and “whispers” in a menacing way. The ash takes on strange shapes of man and beast. It is better to cling to the road.

Landmarks on the Green Mountain road are “God-be-thanked”, a tank with a tap on the pipe line, “One Boat” and “Two Boats”. The boats are ships’

gigs sawn in half and placed upright beside the track as milestones; relics of naval humour. At nine hundred feet the road rises suddenly, and you begin to realise how the marines and West African negroes must have toiled when they built this route to the summit. They followed a design with many zigzag turns called ramps; safe enough if you ride or drive carefully in daylight, but seldom used at night.

Coarse grass appears on the uplands, with aloes and prickly pears beside the road. At seventeen hundred feet you see Cape grass, mat grass and cow grass; much better fodder for the thousand and more sheep on the mountain.

Green Mountain is a mountain in the making. Nothing larger than flowering shrubs and ferns grew there early last century. When the navy took over, men-o’-war brought not only trees from all over the world, but tons of good earth for the mountain farm. Now it seems that the trees and vegetation have influenced the climate. Records kept during a decade since World War II suggest that the cooler air above the pastures and cultivated belt has precipitated a higher rainfall.



The author on Ascension Island, standing beside "One Boat", a landmark on the Green Mountain road.

Ascension's finest trees are to be found in the ravines, where soil and moisture favour growth. Gums; cedar trees and Cape yews are established there. Many other trees came from the West Indies. On the slopes, eucalyptus, araucaria, juniper, acacia and castor oil trees were planted. Port Jackson willows and Scotch fir have survived the droughts. Slowly, very slowly, the trees are creeping down the mountain. Centuries hence, Ascension may be covered to the same extent as St. Helena.

Above two thousand feet, round about the oasis near the summit, comes the great transformation. Here are lanes as green and scented as any in Devon; here is the farm with its coconut palms and banana clumps, roses and geraniums, wild raspberries and wild ginger and vegetable gardens, gorse and guavas and blackberries. The buildings stand as monuments to the men who built the road and the farm in the mid-ocean clouds – possibly the strangest farm on the face of the earth. The old sanatorium for fever-stricken seamen, the "Red Lion" barracks with its clock-tower (where the rum was issued), the solid houses, cowbyres and pigsties like slate-roofed cattle palaces; these were built to last for centuries. They had to drive a tunnel

through the mountain for an aqueduct; a dark tunnel with a guide wire along one side. Newcomers are advised to cling tightly to the wire and jump over an imaginary hole in the floor. This ancient Ascension joke still succeeds.

Pass through the tunnel and you look out over Breakneck Valley, one of the steep places where necks have been broken. It blows hard on the mountain. Watch your step on the paths above the precipices. Up here, too, is the cottage where a shepherd hanged himself; yet another reminder of the grim pages in Ascension's past. Sherry and Bitters Corner strikes a more cheerful note. It was named because the bracing winds at that spot gave the navy men keen appetites.

Finally there is the dew-pond, a cemented pond on the very summit in the old crater. This man-made beauty spot far up in the mist belt is surrounded with bamboos. Blue lilies, goldfish and frogs make the pond interesting. And beside the pond is a long, rusty anchor-chain, used last century to haul heavy loads up the mountain. According to an Ascension custom with a forgotten origin you must hold the chain and wish ...

General Godfrey Mundy, who visited the island nine years after the occupation, found seven horses there. He rode over the hills and valleys of volcanic ashes, up Green Mountain, to the hamlet of half a dozen houses built like an eagle's eyrie three hundred feet below the summit. They gave him a breakfast of "beefsteak" and "veal cutlets", both made of turtle meat. The general found that English potatoes and sweet potatoes were being grown, with pumpkins and plantains. West Africa supplied such items as calaloo (a tropical spinach), peppers and cassava, bananas and melons for the early garden. Cape gooseberries were among the first fruits. Every ship brought new plants. It became the custom for officers stationed there to contribute some useful botanical item; now it is a tradition, and no cable manager departs before he has planted a tree or flower which Ascension has not seen before.

Stand near the summit of Green Mountain when the sun is going down, and in clear weather you will observe a spectacle which is, I believe, peculiar to this island. Face the east, and a gigantic shadow of the mountain is projected slowly across the ocean. When the shadow reaches the horizon it rises and

presents a distinct shadow of Ascension's peak against the eastern sky.

This island lacking fresh water and timber attracted many early visitors because of the turtles. Captain Leslie, a British shipmaster who called late in the eighteenth century, declared that the Ascension turtles were the finest in creation, "fat and large and in the highest perfection for eating of all I ever tasted".

Another tribute came from Captain George Young of H.M.S. *Weazle*, who put in at Ascension for turtle because most of his men were suffering from scurvy. He reported that the turtle "saved many a good man's life".

Ascension's turtle is the green turtle, *Chelonia mydas*, the only true sea turtle which an epicure will touch. (The fat is greenish in colour, hence the name.) Giants among the green turtle weigh nearly half a ton. No male turtle has ever been identified on Ascension. Only the females land there, always between Christmas and June, always on dark nights, lumbering up the beaches far beyond high water mark. Then each female digs a sand pit with its flippers and deposits fifty to sixty eggs. They have

always been allowed to lay their eggs before capture. Turtle experts, by the way, do not talk of males and females, but of "bulls" and "hens".

When you find the same delicacy on your doorstep every day it soon becomes unattractive. Thus the luxurious turtle soup does not often appear on Ascension menus; not only because a licence is necessary to "turn" a turtle, but also because turtle soup takes three days to prepare, and only on great occasions is it worth the effort.

They made a noble effort in 1957, when the Duke of Edinburgh landed. Mrs G. Elliot-Pyle, who simmered the royal soup, informed me that she used the "calipash", the greenish flesh from the belly. Marrow-bones, herbs and spices, fresh basil from the mountain, fresh thyme and parsley and tomatoes went into the pot. Turtle fat, celery and more turtle meat were added on the second day; and on the third day the nourishing soup was strained and clarified. Mrs Elliot-Pyle made enough soup for eighteen people on that occasion. Crawfish with lettuce salad, tiny pork chops with swedes and mashed potato, and a mousse of coffee, rum and raisins completed the Duke of Edinburgh's lunch.

Compare this menu with the experiences of a sarcastic army officer who visited Ascension in the 'eighties of last century. Among his notes I found these remarks: "Ascension produces nothing but turtles, rats and wideawakes. A starved bullock is slaughtered on Saturdays, and salt junk and groceries are served out by the purser's steward. The fortunate possessor of a bunch of carrots or a half-crown cabbage is in a position to give a sumptuous dinner. Water is so scarce that it is served out like a ration of rum. What a charming place; nothing to do to pass the time, nothing to eat and nothing to drink."

Turtle kraals, built early last century in a creek where the tide ebbs and flows, are now used as playgrounds and swimming pools by the children. The seamen and marines of old would often capture a hundred, two hundred turtles in a night and keep them in those kraals. A thousand turtles were shipped to England in one year for the King, the lords of the Admiralty and other distinguished people. Each turtle was marked on the belly shell with the name of the owner. Casualties occurred during the long voyage under sail, and the seaman in charge of the turtle would report to the captain: "I

don't like the looks of Lord Melville this morning, sir." Another day the news would spread: "Duke of Wellington died last night." A tradition arose, however, which was observed in all British men-o'-war: "The King's turtle never dies."

Men of the old Ascension garrisons were issued with fresh turtle meat almost every day. It was cooked like beef or mutton, but nothing could disguise the richness and most of the men detested it. I was amused to see, in an old naval diet sheet drawn up for prisoners in the cells: "Turtle soup will be served twice a week." However, some of the soldiers must have enjoyed it, for I found a diary which read: "We have turtle in various ways – soups, broth, excellent cutlets like veal, and in pies which are very good." Nevertheless, a glass of fresh milk has always been more deeply appreciated on Ascension than a plate of turtle soup.

Another entry in the records showed that an early captain of the island had gone on board a visiting ship which had a cargo of horses, and had exchanged four turtles for two horses.

Turtle hunters slip a noose over the back and fore fin, twist the rope round a stick, and use the stick

for turning the turtle over on its back. Turtle crawl out on to Long Beach and Dead Man's Beach, close to the settlement; they have never learnt to avoid man. But man handles these monsters from a bygone age with care, for a blow from a flipper may break a wrist.

Ten weeks after the eggs have been laid, the sun has done its hatching and tiny young turtles emerge from the sand to start their perilous journey towards the sea. Many are devoured by sea-birds. Others reach the water only to be swallowed by the fierce and expectant conger eel. I have a pair of hollow baby turtles, killed and preserved by St. Helena islanders working on Ascension; these are among the Ascension curios, prized by all old cable men who have been stationed there. The turtles appear to have been "blown" like birds' eggs, but the islanders keep this process secret.

Cockroaches are not prominent residents, as a rule. Years ago heavy rain fell, high grass appeared where only clinker had been known before, and with the grass came a cockroach invasion. Every house was raided. Officers of an American man-o'-war were being entertained at this period, but a dance at the club had to be abandoned. The dance

floor was a moving carpet of cockroaches, and the servants could not sweep them away fast enough.

Nothing like that has occurred again though clothing is still eaten by cockroaches. One still hears tales of raids on houses and gardens by land-crabs, however, and these are more ferocious than cockroaches. Some are nine inches long, with huge mouths; vicious monsters coloured brown or yellow or reddish purple. They live among the cactus of the craters, and always they are eager to find carrion. "One of the most revolting sights I ever saw was a swarm of land-crabs devouring a dead sheep," a cable man told me. "There is an island legend of a shepherd who fell asleep and had his eyes picked out by the crabs, and I can believe it. I know the story of the shepherd who had his watch stolen by land-crabs is true, for the watch was found in a crab hole."

Captain Brandreth found the land-crabs so troublesome that he trained a pack of dogs to hunt them. The crabs fought back, rearing up defiantly with raised claws, and nipping their enemies from their burrows so that the dogs howled with pain. Rats and crabs are always at war. On the run, the rat usually succeeds in getting in a deadly bite. But a

rat that enters a crab-hole is lucky to emerge alive. Crabs also tackle the very young rabbits with confidence, but leave the older rabbits alone.

Roasted crabs form one of the island's snacks. Take a small bore rifle to Cricket Valley if you fancy crab hunting and you will return with a good haul.

Ascension provides glaring examples of man's folly in setting one animal against another. Rats swam ashore over a century ago and bred in such numbers that the first British commander decided to wipe them out. He sent for cats, which fled to the remote corners of the island and preyed not on rats but on poultry and the useful wild guinea-fowl. So another commander imported dogs to hunt the cats. Dogs have never flourished on Ascension because the clinker lacerates their feet. The dogs faded out, and today two sheepdogs on the mountain farm are the only members of their tribe.

Rats of Ascension are of two species, a black, glossy-furred rat of the mountain and a brown rat in the settlement. Darwin considered that the variations were due to their different environments on the island. Tiny "clinker" mice are also found, but these do little or no harm.

Naturalists studying the reversion of domestic animals to the wild state will find good material in the Ascension cats. I am a cat lover, but I would think twice about taking one of the tigerish Ascension breed into my home. After centuries of freedom they have developed ferocious canine teeth. "Tame" specimens guard their owners' houses like dogs, rushing at visitors. They will also follow their owners at heel from house to house. "Beware of the cat" is a warning you will do well to heed on Ascension. A cat will bite unexpectedly and run. Babies have to be guarded. It is a firm rule on the cable station that no one may keep more than one cat. I think cats would be banned entirely if they were not so useful in keeping the rats and land crabs out of the houses.

Every cat, "tame" or wild, knows when the wideawakes are breeding. Every home loses its dubious pet, and the whole cat breed goes to the haunts of the birds to prey on the chicks. Some of the wild cats are so bold that they have been detected killing very young lambs on the mountain slopes.

Turnips were ruined by wireworm on the farm some years ago. Pairs of rooks were sent from England to

destroy the pest. The rooks nested, the young birds learnt to fly; and then one day the whole rook colony left Ascension, never to return. Mynah birds were brought from Mauritius after that episode. But the only birds which have really proved an asset to Ascension are the guinea-fowl and red-legged partridge. They add a touch of luxury to the island menu. General Mundy, who visited the island early last century, said the guinea-fowl got up in enormous coveys and flew as strong as pheasants. In one year two thousand guineafowl were shot for the table. Wild cattle roamed the mountain in those days, but they became dangerous and were exterminated by the garrison.

Ascension's rabbits are the descendants of Cape (probably Robben Island) rabbits set free by some shipmaster many years before the island was occupied. So many have been shot that the rabbit may share the fate of Juan de Nova's goats. The scanty vegetation cannot support a large rabbit colony. It was during World War II that American service men shot the last of the wild goats, that tough breed of goat which had roamed mountain and plain for nearly four and a half centuries.

In the queer world of nature on Ascension Island

the lumbering turtles are rivalled in sheer fascination by the graceful sooty terns. Millions of these mysterious seabirds invade the plains of the island; not at the same time every year, as you might expect, but at intervals of about nine months. No one knows where they go when they depart. Many questions about the sooty tern remain unsolved.

Wideawakes, they call them on the island. I heard the parent birds calling to their young at dawn one morning on Wideawake Fair, and became aware immediately of the origin of the name. They scream in such lively chorus as they greet the day that there can be no doubt about their wakefulness. Wideawake Fair is their age-old home on the island, a number of flat spaces between hillocks close to the south-west coast. No doubt the noise of many thousands of birds reminded someone of a busy country fair ground.

Wideawakes have an enormous range, and they breed (sometimes in immense colonies) from the West Indies to the Pacific isles. I believe that Ascension is their greatest nesting stronghold. Sometimes the curtain of birds is dense enough to black out the sun. No one who has seen these sea

swallows with their long, slender wings and forked tails on Wideawake Fair ever forgets the spectacle. Walk among them, and many remain unafraid and refuse to take to the air. Dr. James P. Chapin, assistant curator of birds at the American Museum of Natural History, estimated that he saw one hundred thousand terns at once on the main Wideawake Fair, and there were many other “fairs” in the neighbourhood. Thus it would be no exaggeration to say there are a million, possibly two million wideawakes on Ascension.

Dr. Chapin was called to Ascension during World War II, after American engineers had built a mile-long runway down Wideawake Fair. They had completed the formidable task in three months so that not only bombers but fighters might cross the ocean in greater safety. And then the birds imperilled the whole vast enterprise. Pilots naturally hated the birds that rose in screeching clouds when they opened up their engines. One wideawake smashed through the cockpit windshield of a Flying Fortress and wrecked the radio. Always there was the danger that the birds might be caught in air-scoops or openings in the engines.

So the army tried poison and bullets, smoke candles

and flares and regular explosions. The birds went on laying their eggs under the aircraft. Dr. Chapin studied them with the trained eyes of an ornithologist, and noticed that the birds moved away if their eggs were broken. He recommended the organised destruction of the eggs, and soldiers broke the eggs at the rate of forty thousand a day. The plan succeeded.

When I drove down the great runway called Wideawake Field the Americans had returned to Ascension, and they were building a guided missile station with the same energy they had displayed in wartime. But there were no birds to bother the occasional post-war transport aircraft landing on the old mid-ocean runway. The wideawakes have not been wiped out, as many people feared. But they have moved on.

I stood there at dawn beside the hill at the end of the runway, watching the birds swarming up to greet the day, racing out to sea to prey on small fish. And when full daylight came I saw something else which reminded me all too vividly of another desert I knew in wartime. It was a bomber in ten thousand fragments, scattered over the hillside which it struck years ago. I have seen many wrecked aircraft on the

field of battle, but nothing so small as that tragic American bomber which failed to lift in time.

Wideawakes are unpredictable birds. One season long ago their breeding grounds were flooded, so they remained on Ascension for nearly a year, laying their eggs again. It seems that they cling to the island until they have a young bird ready to take to the wing with them. When the armies of wideawakes migrate from Ascension they do not fly away in long columns like cormorants, heading for some destination. Wideawakes scatter, with no line of flight to betray their intention.

I said there were possibly two million wideawakes, and by this time the people on Ascension must have eaten millions of their eggs. Though the bird is small, the green egg speckled with dark spots is the size of a hen's egg. A flavour is hard to describe, and possibly for that reason the wideawake's egg has been compared with that of the plover. I found the wideawake's egg more fishy, but not unpleasantly fishy. The white is glutinous and clearer than a hen's egg, while the yolk is a pumpkin colour. Some housewives on Ascension use the eggs in puddings, pancakes and omelettes, and fry, boil or poach them. Others will not look at

them.

If you want to be absolutely sure of your wideawake's eggs, draw a circle in the clinker, take all the eggs out, and then wait until the birds have laid fresh ones. You can have them every day for two or three months. The birds and their eggs receive a certain measure of protection at the present time. Old naval garrisons, however, must have revelled in these eggs. Island records show that in one week the men gathered one hundred and twenty thousand eggs. And a remark passed by a rating of Queen Victoria's day has been preserved: "I fear summat must be wrong wi' me. Last season I could eat as many as four dozen of them wideawake eggs at a sitting. Now I can only manage two dozen."

Those bygone, turtle-fed sailors had a nickname for Ascension. They called it "Soup Island". It should have been "Soup and Egg Island". St. Helena people regard wideawake eggs as a great delicacy. Every islander working on Ascension is permitted to collect two dozen eggs for export, and every southbound liner carries a shipment to the "sister island".

Fresh patches of bird guano whiten the lava in many places. Holes in the clinker are filled with ancient guano deposits, and scientists have stated that an extinct species of penguin or albatross may have nested there. This guano has been worked at intervals with more or less success. English Bay, along the coast to the north of Garrison, was the headquarters of a guano company and some of the buildings are still there. (Their lights misled a liner, which ran aground but floated off safely.) Steam down the west coast of Ascension and you come to Bo'sun-bird Islet, a guano rock with a bird population which is of great interest to scientists. I met a St. Helena islander who lived and worked on this appalling rock thirty years ago; one of the most frightening places I have set eyes upon during a long search for strange islands.

Bo'sun-bird Islet rises sheer from the sea in a manner which I dislike intensely. It is close to the coast, yet a large ship could pass in safety in the deep water between islet and shore. Only a skilled mountaineer could survive there. The islet is a massive column three hundred feet high, with about an acre of flat land on top. Coloured pale yellow with guano, it is like a monstrous old tooth jutting

up from the clear blue water. A rope ladder hangs from a projecting rock, and thus explorers and guano workers gain access to the islet and the narrow, perilous track leading to the summit. How the first visitor secured a foothold without the rope ladder is a mystery.

My informant, Sergeant Dillon of the St. Helena Police, told me that he was fifteen years old when he joined the guano workers. They spent five days at a stretch on Bo'sun-bird, taking their boat to Garrison every week-end. "We had to dig 'graves' for ourselves in the guano if we wanted to sleep in safety at night," Dillon recalled. "Otherwise we might have rolled off the islet into the sea. There is a recess, you can't call it a cave, about halfway up, and we made that our home – but always in bitter discomfort. The top of the islet was impossible. Birds and lice eat you up on top."

One party of American naturalists visited Bo'sun-bird Islet shortly before Dillon worked there. They were members of an expedition sent to the South Atlantic islands in the schooner Blossom by the Cleveland Museum. These five men endured the hardships of the islet for a fortnight, their hands and feet pecked and cut by the birds, choking in the all-

pervading guano dust. But they studied the bird life thoroughly and brought back many specimens.

Bo'sun-bird is the breeding-place of the Ascension frigate-bird, classified two centuries ago by Linnaeus and now known to be at home only on this islet. With a body the size of a hen, it has a wingspan running up to ten feet. Males and females have black plumage. Frigate-birds attack other birds fiercely and unexpectedly like the fast-sailing frigates of old; hence the name. A frigate-bird will overtake the slower booby or tern, and if the victim does not disgorge its fish immediately, the frigate-bird will deliver a crippling blow with its sharp hooked bill. Frigate birds are also known as "man-o'-war hawks". (The species found in the Pacific islands are sometimes domesticated and used to carry messages, like pigeons.) Eggs of the frigate-bird, white and oval and larger than a duck's-egg, are a favourite delicacy among the St. Helena people on Ascension.

The bo'sun-bird which gave its name to the islet is the redbilled tropic-bird, a white-plumed bird with long tail feathers like white streamers. Wideawakes also jostle for space on the summit. The blue-faced booby breeds on Bo'sun-bird Islet, and rivals the

terns and tropic-birds as a diver.

You have seen that Ascension is not entirely a desert, but the appeal which this island possesses for many people may still elude you. I will tell you how the secret of Ascension was revealed to me.

It is five in the morning and very dark offshore as the motorboat carries me towards the rock in Clarence Bay which they call Tartar Stairs because of the steps cut in its face. They fish for man-eating sharks from this jetty. A long swell breaks noisily on Dead Man's Beach as we moor the motor-boat and step across into the dinghy to go alongside the steps – Bruce of the cable station and I, the eccentric visitor, and two St. Helena boatmen.

As the boat rises and falls, as the surf crashes a few yards away, Bruce warns me that landing will not be easy. I assure him that I am at home in small boats and will be in no danger. Bruce then leads the way, reaching for the rope that hangs above the steps. He misses the rope and falls headlong into the dark, noisy sea. I remember the sharks. One boatman and I drag Bruce over the side, while the other boatman shows great skill in keeping the boat out of the surf. During a lull we make the steps at

last. Thus I arrive in Ascension for the second time, and walk reflectively round Garrison while Bruce is changing his clothes.

Here is the centre of Ascension's little capital, the double-storied Exiles' Club with the clock presented by Queen Victoria in the naval days: It has wide open doors, and wicker chairs on the long balcony; and I can see that for decade after decade the men and women of Garrison have found pleasure in their drinks on that balcony in the cool trade wind. (No doubt the pleasure is heightened by the fact that whisky is still under six shillings a bottle and gin three shillings.) Here they talk of the life they have known on cable stations as far apart as Cocos and Rio; the lonely places of the earth and the great cities and the crowds. They talk with the voice of experience, and I am still wondering why Ascension ranks so high in their affections. I gaze round the club in search of inspiration.

Three huge turtle-shells hang from the walls. The oldest bears the names of every Royal Navy and Royal Marine commander; the next lists the cable managers; and the third gives you the American officers in command of the air base. That first turtle reminds you of Ascension's tragic past, for it

records three commanders in the middle of last century who died on duty and one who was removed.

What is the secret? Before I landed today one cable man told me he had spent two years on the island, the regular period, and had just volunteered to stay on for another six months. (This man had been stationed previously for fifteen years in Alexandria, which is no mean city.) I thought of the farmer who was engaged by the navy as a young man and spent almost his whole life happily on Green Mountain; a broken-hearted old man who had to leave when the navy departed. I recalled a doctor who worked on Ascension for many years, refusing every offer of transfer. Once he went to England on leave and hated it. He said that his return to Ascension was the happiest day of his life.

Yet this was the same island which men once dreaded. "A scraggy, barren rock," wrote a seaman two centuries ago. "Were it not for the famous large turtle it would be known only as a mark in the middle of the ocean to be shunned by navigators." And there was a British general who declared: "St. Helena is a rock, Ascension is a cinder."



Here is the centre of Ascension's little capital, the double storeyed Exiles' Club with the clock presented by Queen Victoria in the naval days.

So what is the secret? A new day is flooding over the neat bungalows and sheltered gardens of Garrison, and I hope it will bring the answer. I can see old Fort Thornton now to the eastward and another battery of Georgian and Victorian cannon to the west. This place is a nautical and military museum starting with the rusting junk of Napoleon's day and ending with aids to atomic warfare piled up on Long Beach by the United States Air Force. If they land any more drums of fuel there will be no room for the turtles to lay their eggs. But it is not the grey breath of old wars or threat of new ones that holds people on this island. Or the many reminders of past tragedies. I can distinguish the old naval cemetery close to Dead Man's Beach, a name which it gained one day when the rollers swept over the graves and tore them open and littered the beach with skeletons and coffins. Such events only deepen the mystery.

Perhaps they love the beaches and the sea, you say? You must pay a fine of five pounds if they catch you walking on the island beaches; that is, if you come back alive. The treacherous sea that desecrated the cemetery has a way of taking people by surprise on the golden sands. Rollers flood Long

Beach and the football field, break over the jetty and damage the crane. Once a nursemaid and two young children were swept away suddenly, never to be seen again, leaving the captain of marines and his wife to grieve for them.

So now the only bathing place is Comfortless Cove, where the cables are brought on shore. Comfortless is a sheltered place among the rocks, with a red-roofed cable house and a banana leaf hut for bathers. Even here it is dangerous to go far out. Fishing is forbidden while bathers are in the water, because the bait attracts fierce barracuda and sharks. And all the time someone has to watch the narrow entrance to the cove to see that the man-eaters do not enter.

Fishing? I can imagine a keen angler revelling in the fishing. "One afternoon ten of us fished from the pontoon near the jetty," a cable man told me. "We caught over one hundred fish, mainly the local rock-cod." Tunny and wahoo are caught easily enough from motor-boats offshore. Every year the "fly" arrive in millions, fish of the marsbanker (horse mackerel) family, and are chased right up on to the beach by the tunny. You can pick up stranded marsbankers and cavally on Long Beach by the

dozen if you get there before the shrieking seabirds.

Cavally are often speared from the pontoon, smoked and sent to St. Helena. Crawfish are easily caught in nets, and you can find oysters and crabs to vary the shellfish menu. Most plentiful of all the Ascension fish is the black turbot or trigger fish (just "blackfish" on the island), a scavenger which loves seaweed and will clean the hull of any ship in the anchorage. Finest table fish is the conger. Each householder pays seven shillings and sixpence a month, which covers the cost of sending a fishing boat out on every calm day. Each afternoon a selection of fresh fish are dropped into all the kitchen sinks on the island. For that reason the cable people eat meat for lunch, as a rule, and plan fish suppers.

What else has Ascension to offer? Good mutton from the mountain, and occasional beef steak flown in from America, bananas from the island farm, wild guavas for making jelly, and paw-paw, grape fruit, granadillas and tomatoes. A little mineral water factory in Garrison produces sodas, ginger-beer and tonics at two pence halfpenny a bottle. And for the vases on veranda tables there are the mountain flowers called "poppers" that come down

wrapped in ferns and wild ginger leaves. Or carnations from your own garden if you have been careful.

I think the cable wives like the island because housekeeping is easy, because everyone is healthy and young children flourish. A year or more may pass without a death on the cable station. (There were about fifty white people when I was last there, and one hundred and fifty St. Helenans.) With a library and an open-air cinema, tennis courts and the worst golf course in the world (thanks to the clinker) no one need be bored.

You can still live more cheaply in Ascension than in the cities. All a man needs in the way of clothes are shirts, shorts and tropical mess kit. A motor-car is not a necessity, though cars have been used there since 1931, and there are now several modern cars as well as the original pioneer baby car and a number of motorcycles. The navy had a system of rails and trolleys throughout Garrison, but tarmac and dust roads have been made since then. But even now it is impossible to avoid the cruel clinker. A set of tyres lasts for no more than three thousand miles. No one becomes attached to Ascension because of the motoring, for it is no pleasure; merely a means

of reaching the mountain and the American zone.

Green Mountain, which I have called a paradise, explains some of the charm of Ascension, and there is no doubt that without that mountain the island would be regarded as a melancholy rock of exile. It is the contrast that makes a stay on the mountain so memorable. The cable men take one week's local leave every six months. On the mountain they can walk and climb and breathe a different air. Above all they enjoy the fire in the grate at night, something unknown down below.

As I stand here on the club balcony gazing out over Garrison the St. Helenan servants are going to work. There is no mystery about their love for Ascension. They sign contracts for two years, and most of them try to remain longer before returning to their own poverty-stricken island. Ascension gives them security and good meals for two years at a stretch. A trained male cook receives seven pounds a month, and regards it as wealth. Some of the St. Helenan cable employees earn extra money by cooking and doing other housework in their spare time.

Everyone finds work to do on Ascension, for that is

one of the obvious ways of living happily in isolation. From top to bottom you meet people doing more than one job. The cable manager has two desks in his office; one for the problems of submarine telegraphy and wireless; the other for use when he has to sit in judgment as magistrate or deal with the administration of the island. Another cable official acts as club secretary and lay reader in church. The doctor is also the island registrar and marriage officer. With only one ship a month to handle, as a rule, the harbourmaster is easily able to manage the canteen and act as clerk of the court; and his wife is the postmistress. When your shoes need mending you take them to the baker. The butcher is a first-class cook and waiter. Joshua, the power house attendant, will cut your hair.

In the dawn, before the sun blazes harshly on the abominable clinker, Garrison makes a mellow and comfortable picture of a self-contained, seaside world. Now I can understand something that baffled me for a long time. A bachelor like myself might easily suffer from "Ascensionitis" in this place, a well-known form of nerves or state of dissatisfaction which cannot be cured with gin at three shillings a bottle – though some have tried.

But a man with a family might find this easy-going life very much to his taste. (As for his wife, one of them remarked to me: “ I like Ascension because there are no social problems – everyone knows his place.”) It is a friendly place. If you have travelled the world you must know that people in small, remote places tend to share their pleasures and usually manage to create a more hospitable, mellow atmosphere than the lonely people of the cities.

All day and all night the busy cable lines from Britain and South America, West Africa and South Africa, chatter away through the Ascension listening-post. You would say that these people could never forget the urgent outside world ... but they can. Ascension, the contented little suburbia in mid-ocean, has become their world. They are concerned with their own affairs, and satisfied with the safe and cheerful daily round in Garrison, with the mountain as an outlet when the clinker becomes monotonous.

They leave Ascension with their memories of the cries of the wideawakes, the chirping of millions of crickets after the rare rain, the tremendous crashing on the beaches when the rollers come up, the loudest sound of all. They remember the starlit

nights and quiet dawns, and the sun coming up serenely over the wide, unbroken ocean. And if you told them that Ascension was a grim, weird island they would look at you in wonder. Ascension gave them peace of mind.

Chapter 18

THE FORTUNATE ISLES

*There was no heavy heat, no cold;
The dwellers there wax never old,
Nor wither with the waning time,
But each man keeps that age he had
When first he won the fairy clime.*

Andrew Lang.

FOND THOUGH I am of travel, it is a sad moment for me when I have to leave the friends I have made and step off a good, comfortable ship on to some foreign waterfront. I was sorry to see the *Dunnottar Castle* moving away from Las Palmas. Then a new adventure opened and I found myself wandering happily in a city of bananas and grapes with an aroma of roasted maize and coffee and sometimes of rum.

Many thousands of South Africans know the Canary Islands by sight; the peak of Teneriffe; the long Generalissimo Franco quay at Las Palmas; the Bandama *caldera* outside Las Palmas where you look down seven hundred feet into a faultless crater with a solitary farmhouse at the bottom surrounded by orange trees, bananas, vines and wheat. Possibly

you have shopped in Triana, the main street of Las Palmas, where the leather goods are cheap and excellent and the huge dolls are world-famous. (One of the first men I met there was Senor Casanova the doll merchant, and he told me the dolls were not locally made, but came from Barcelona.) You had a drink or a meal at the Santa Catalina, or in the San Telmo park, and noticed that even in the most luxurious places the prices were reasonable.

I wanted more than the passenger's glimpse of the Fortunate Isles. I had read everything, and now I decided to break my journey and see for myself the cities and solitudes of these Spanish possessions in African waters.

Scientists regard the peaks of the Canary Islands as signposts above one of the greatest mysteries of mankind. Who were the Guanches, the people found on all the islands when the first explorers arrived? Was this the Garden of Eden, swallowed up in the convulsion that gave rise to the legends of the Flood? In one of the almost inaccessible caves of the Canaries, perhaps, the old secret will be revealed at last. Certainly there is still a great deal of research to be done before the mystery of the

Guanches is solved.

For centuries the Canary Islands were the very edge of the known world. They are recognised easily enough in the writings of Herodotus: "The world ends where the sea is no longer navigable, in that place where are the gardens of the Hesperides, where Atlas supports the sky on a mountain as conical as a cylinder."

The smoke of the volcanic Peak of Teneriffe was visible from the coast of Africa. It is clear that the ancients sailed in this direction on voyages of discovery, and that the Romans landed on the archipelago centuries before the French and Portuguese expeditions which brought news of the islands to Europe. Arab records, indeed, state that Admiral Ben Farroukh landed there in A.D. 999, and the Phoenicians probably called there much earlier.

Names always make me restless if I cannot find a reasonable explanation. The canary bird was named after the wild brown or green bird which belongs to these isles, and from which the fancier's yellow canary has been bred artificially. You have to go back to Pliny for the true meaning of the name

Canary. Pliny declared that King Juba (in the year 40 B.C.) brought back two large dogs from the islands and named the group Canaria from the Latin *canis*.

It is on record that the Guanches ate a type of sheep dog. This large dog, known as the *bardino*, survives on some of the islands, and makes a fierce watchdog. The *bardino* guarded the nobility and the vestal virgins of the Guanches. Its descendants, with brown and black spots, now guard the farms. Canarios are proud of this legacy, and a fine sculptor has immortalised a group of them in bronze on the Plaza de Santa Ana in Las Palmas. "But you must be careful with those dogs," Senor Don Perez Naranjo of the tourist office warned me. "I kept one. It never became tame and it bit everyone – my father, sister and brother – so I had to have it destroyed."

Grand Canary is smaller than Teneriffe and only half the height. It gained the name of Gran Canaria because the Guanches there resisted the Spanish invasion with greater spirit than the people of the other islands. Imagine a saucer of mud turned upside down, the sides gashed by the deep ravines called *barrancos*, and you have Grand Canary from

the air.

Naranjo talked to me about prices in the islands. In this changing world I hesitate to quote the cost of living when I was there in September and October of 1956; but those prices were (and are still?) extremely reasonable. Many imported goods are allowed into Las Palmas duty-free, and this explains what would otherwise be incredible; the American cigarettes at the equivalent of a shilling for twenty and other luxuries at low prices.

Food and drink are cheap, too. At the Santa Catalina Hotel in Las Palmas, finest in the islands, and equal to the first-class hotels of Europe, I paid under three pounds a day inclusive for really superb meals, a huge room and bath. Off the tourist track in Gomera I came across a good pension that charged permanent residents seven shillings a day. Even in Las Palmas or Teneriffe, first-class pensions were available at fifteen shillings a day including all meals and tips.

I heard of an American salesman who had saved up six hundred pounds after World War II and wanted to settle where he could learn to paint, swim and lie in the sun, and live cheaply until he was able to pay

his way as an artist. Las Palmas suited him admirably. He found an artists' colony growing up there, with inspiring Canario and Spanish painters at work. And at the end of three years he had not spent half his capital. Perhaps that was just as well, as he had not yet reached the professional grade as an artist. But he had no complaints about the beachcombing life, the food or the wine.

Some of the Las Palmas buses looked vaguely familiar to me. A friend explained that many old London buses were still on duty there. It is a city of bells, gongs and motor-horns; but they drive carefully and I never saw an accident.

In summer the sensible Canarios work from eight in the morning to two in the afternoon. Shops open from nine to one, and from three to seven. (Indian traders, as you might expect, hardly ever close.) In the evening these island people make good use of their beaches, so close to the city. Great fishermen, they go after the tunny With rods and dive in frogmen's outfits for other varieties. They claim that the underwater fishing is the finest in the world because so little has been done.

Las Palmas folk are thrifty. They claim that their

city goats provide more and better milk than any other goats in the world, as much as four litres a day from a nanny that lives on the roof with the fowls.

Triana, the main street, named after the Seville suburb; is the marriage market of the city. Here the men scrutinise all passing feminine beauty. Here they utter piropos, the neat compliments which the girls enjoy; though as a rule they do not give a flicker of response. Sometimes a girl may decide to snub the man who praises her face or figure clumsily, and then she will reply coldly: "I have a mirror at home."

I studied the Triana shop-windows and bought a magnificent suit-case. (Spaniards learnt the art of leatherwork from the Arabs long ago.) I saw familiar books with such Spanish titles as "Abominable Hombre", our old friend the snowman. Women from ships appeared to be enthralled by the lingerie, the modistas, the lace mantillas and embroidered sheets. French perfumes were on sale at Paris prices. Spanish pearls and mother-o'-pearl jewellery, fans and baskets, dolls like bullfighters and dolls like gipsies, fine wines and rich foods; such are the treasures of Triana and it is not difficult for a visitor to spend his pesetas.

Many doors have a square spy-hole called a *reja*, for home life is hidden as in Spain. Most shutters have a *postigo*, a hinged flap which allows an almost unseen senorita to talk to her lover in the street. Glance into the patio if you have the chance and there are creepers and ferns. Brilliant masses of red or lilac bougainvillea drape the walls of every street. These are the islands of flowers, and in the world as I have seen it only Madeira is a close rival as a gardener's paradise.

Blue gums and mealies, pepper trees, cactus and aloes reminded me of South Africa when I drove through the northern districts of Grand Canary. Geraniums growing wild along the roads were among the differences. So were the cave dwellers. Soft sandstone cliffs are honey-combed with the retreats of the old Guanche troglodytes. Some of the very poor people of the island still live in these caves, for there is no tax to pay if a house has no door. You realise what splendid mountaineers the Guanches must have been when you visit the caves, for there are strongholds which may be reached only by narrow ledges along the faces of the cliffs and no one but an expert climber would attempt to reach them.

I passed through the banana and rum town of Arucas, through old Guanche valleys and coffee plantations until I came to the great ravine where the mineral springs of Berrazales draw invalids from all over the islands. It is a carbonic acid gas spring with the usual reputation for miraculous cures. I fell into conversation with a man from Teneriffe who told me that he had suffered from rheumatism while working in England; now he spends his leave every year at Berrazales, and that keeps his rheumatism at bay.

My hotel had packed me a picnic lunch of cold ham omelette, garlic sausage, tongue, cheese, rolls and four different fruits. My bath in the warm spring had given me an appetite. So I remember Berrazales, with the water bubbling over the rocks past the tree where I sat in the shade. Later in my Canary journey, when I flew across from La Laguna in Teneriffe to Gando in Grand Canary, I picked out the landmarks of my drive; church spires and the white chimney of the Arucas rum factory; little round dams where the water must be used wisely; the small town of Guia where the cheeses are flavoured with the flower of the wild artichoke; and far up the valley, the hotel and the bath house at

Berrazales, where I sat with a red-haired American enjoying that surprisingly appetising cold *tortilla* with its sautéed potatoes and sliced onions.

Wherever you go in the coastal regions of the Canaries, there are the bananas. Sometimes it pays better to grow bananas in city plantations than to sell the land for building; so that in Las Palmas you see a banana jungle between the port and the main business centre. A shrewd Liverpool shipping magnate named Sir Alfred Jones was known as the “father of the Canary banana”, and the islanders were so grateful that they named a street in Las Palmas after him. Jones also put Las Palmas on the map by starting the coaling depot there for the benefit of his West African ships. He opened banks and hotels as well, and it was no trouble at all to him to introduce crates of bananas to eager customers in Britain and the Continent.

In a shipping office near the *puerto* in Las Palmas I stepped into the year 1888, and entered upon a strange experience. This was the office built by a Mr. Pavillard and Sir Alfred Jones in the days when Las Palmas was just an empty bay and the island lived on its wine and sugar. Mr. Eugene Pavillard, son of the founder, showed me round this museum-

piece of an office with its valuable models of forgotten steamers, its Cuban mahogany panelling, glass partitions, carved woodwork, old-fashioned presses and filing cabinets and a circular iron staircase to the roof. "This office has never closed, night or day, since my father opened it in 1888," declared Mr. Pavillard. Old leather armchairs, old leather-bound shipping volumes, old pictures took my mind back to those golden days when fortunes awaited the enterprising business man and not even a rumour of war disturbed the stock exchange. And there on the wall was a portrait of Sir Alfred Jones with his heavy moustache, the man who started it all. Once there were fair-sized British colonies in Las Palmas and Teneriffe, a sequel to Sir Alfred's efforts, and fragments remain to this day.

Mr. Eugene Pavillard and a pleasant young Canario on his staff showed me phases of life in Las Palmas that I might otherwise have missed. Las Palmas is nearly five hundred years old. It has planned, modern thoroughfares; but the Vegueta quartet takes you back to Columbus. I was walking round the fine mansions of Vegueta with my Canario friend when I told him of my childhood memory of the garrotte. "You wish to see it again?" he

inquired, and soon led the way into an old building with dungeons. One grim stone room held two engines of death in one; a scaffold with gallows above and garrotte below. Yes, there was the ghastly steel collar I had remembered for so long. The victim would be placed on a seat and the garrotte locked firmly round his neck. Then a heavy, fast-revolving screw would come into action so that in a second the spine would snap.

My friend explained that the garrotte was no longer used in the islands. Canarios have a long-standing horror of capital punishment, which goes right back to the days of the Guanches. Even a butcher is looked upon with contempt. The public executioner was regarded with such horror that every Canario muttered when he passed: "Dios me libre de tus manos." (God deliver me from thy hands.) Nowadays few sentences of death are passed, and condemned men are sent to Spain for execution by shooting. My friend assured me that the garrotte was reserved for the most serious crimes. I asked for details. "For very bad people such as Socialists," he replied, sinking his voice. I felt that this would not be the place to recall with pride a vote for Labour.

My friends told me that because Las Palmas has so many flat roofed Moorish houses, and because it lies closer to Africa than Teneriffe, the atmosphere is more African. The city of Santa Cruz de Teneriffe, with narrow, winding streets, is a Spanish city. Sometimes a cloud of fine sand from the Sahara comes roaring across the ninety miles of ocean to Grand Canary. It covers everything. Ships are unable to move. Then comes the rain, the "blood rain" as the Canarios call it, torrents reddened by the dust of Africa. And the burning south-east wind called the *levanter* brings another menace, swarms of locusts, covering the ground to a depth of four feet. Fortunately these visitations from Africa are rare.

Some say that the old streets of Santa Cruz de Teneriffe are more like illustrations from the Old Testament than Spain. Many houses have square towers called miradores and staircases outside the walls leading to flat *azoteas* for taking the evening air on the roof.

Canarios like to think of the Teneriffe people as slow and provincial. You can still hear men with guitars serenading the girls they admire in Teneriffe

on Saturday nights, whereas this custom was forbidden in Las Palmas years ago because it kept people awake. However, the streets of Santa Cruz are picturesque, and no singer disturbed my sleep.

I have heard tourists declare that they prefer Teneriffe to Las Palmas because of the peak, the Pico de Teide which dominates the island just as Table Mountain lords it over Cape Town. I travel in search of people and streets, harbours, waterfronts and beaches rather than heights and landscapes. By chance I have gazed upon Everest and Kanchenjunga and all the great mountains of Africa. I did not come to the Canaries for the sake of the Peak of Teneriffe. Nevertheless, I could not but sense its drama and I was glad to have a closer view of one of the world's volcanic wonders.

Valleys of lava, black cinder heaps and craters remind us that Teneriffe has known many volcanic eruptions. It is possible that the island will blow up one day like Krakatoa, for the volcano is active enough. Half a century ago the islanders were startled by loud detonations and earthquake shocks; and soon afterwards a new crater opened twenty miles from the Peak. No one was killed, however, and no damage was done. As there has been no

serious eruption in Teneriffe since the end of the eighteenth century, it is possible to take a philosophic view about living on the brink of a volcano. And in an island of nine hundred square miles it is possible to survive a volcanic outburst.

Senor Don Manuel Rafols and his wife drove me as far as their car would go on the road to the Peak of Teneriffe. I saw cool La Laguna with them, a university town with a cathedral filled with treasures in silver and marble, and a convent chapel where, once in a century, the public are admitted to High Mass served by Trappist nuns. La Laguna is a place where lovers of fine carved doors and balconies and coats of arms will stand entranced. Here, nearly two thousand feet above sea level, you need blankets on your bed in summer. This was the Guanche stronghold. Now the air liners come in from Spain, every pilot alert for the sudden mists that cover the La Laguna airport.

Along the country roads are the peasants and their donkeys, men wearing blanket capes, women in the little straw hats of the island. Orchards and vineyards, bananas and tomatoes give way to fields of wheat and beans and potatoes. Old wine presses are seen, silent and abandoned. Wine is still made,

but many vineyards were ruined by disease and the days when “Canary sack” was world famous are over.

Pines flourish in the mist belt, and I saw islanders collecting the pine needles that make such grand packing for bananas. Then you are in the Monte Verde, among the evergreens; and then the cloud-belt shuts you in until you climb out of it above five thousand feet. At six thousand the scene has a queer resemblance to the Karoo. The *retama* bushes growing there resemble Karoo succulents. Here are Las Canadas, a lava plain and certainly one of the austere places of the earth. Crosses mark the scene of snow tragedies, and my friends informed me that the police station on the heights was there for the sole purpose of sending out rescuers when cars break down and people are in danger of perishing in winter. I was taken to the famous weather observatory at Izana, where scientists and their families, a community of fifty people, live at an altitude of nearly eight .. thousand feet. They need their solid houses above the clouds, for they are isolated in winter when the roads are blocked by snow. Closer to the peak I visited a new *parador*, a government inn for tourists. Certain types of invalids seem to

benefit from this dustless mountain air and the sunshine; but doctors are not unanimous about this high sanatorium. Obviously there are many sufferers who would do better to remain on the beaches.

Last sign of man on the majestic peak is the rest hut called Alta Vista, fourteen hundred feet below the summit. I stood on the mule track leading to Alta Vista and went no farther; mountains are not for me. But I am sure that those who make the effort on a clear day are rewarded. My old guide book declares: "The surroundings at the summit are the essence of desolation and ruin." However, the writer was thinking only of the crater. From the rim every island in the group may be seen, and the coast of Africa. No other panorama in the world has such wide horizons.

I came down to Oratava with my ears clicking, watching the hunters seeking pheasant in woods of laurel, seeking rabbits amid the giant heath, *Erica arborea*. Always I wish that I knew more botany. Bannerman of the British Museum pointed out that these islands hold the wrecks of many flora. Through the ages, waves of African, Asiatic and American plants passed over this area of the globe

and left rich and varied remnants on the islands. Birds and currents brought seeds. Now the islands form a natural flower garden, and the botanist is in paradise. Francis Masson collected the deep purple statice and other specimens in Teneriffe on his way to the Cape. Humboldt climbed the peak and described forests which have since been burnt for charcoal. Fortunately much of the old glory remains, and there are plants and trees which are found only in the Canaries and a few other Atlantic isles.

Near Oratava is the scene of a romantic legend, the miracles of the Virgin de Candelaria. Centuries ago a shepherd found an image of the Virgin on the sandy beach. Some say it was a ship's figure-head, washed ashore from a wreck; but the image was credited with the power to cure illnesses, and from all the islands people came to worship. Once it was stolen and taken to Fuerteventura. It was restored, however, and remained on the beach for many years. Early last century a great gale swept the island and the image was carried out to sea. A new image, sent by the Pope to replace it, stands there today.

Oratava has inspired painters and poets. It has been

called the loveliest valley in the world, and (what is more to the point) the healthiest town on earth. I shall always think of Oratava because of the lunch at the exquisite hotel chosen by Senor Rafols and his wife. Lunch is a great meal in the Canaries, and one soon forms the siesta habit. I gazed in awe on the wagons of hors-d'oeuvres. People often talk of making a meal of hors-d'oeuvres, but the Canario starts with a stupendous heaped plate of olives and tunny, fat sardines, the excellent island lobster, clams with garlic sauce and oil and chopped parsley, prawns and sausage, savoury rice and peppers. Then he starts his lunch in earnest.

After lunch I saw the oldest dragon tree in the islands. A larger and older specimen, shaped like an hour glass and said to have been six thousand years old, stood at Oratava and was destroyed in a hurricane ninety years ago. That may have been the oldest tree in the world. The present veteran is at Icod; not a tree really but a gigantic member of the asparagus family, also related to the lily.

Dragon trees have sharp massive spikes as leaves and branches like the tentacles of an octopus. They grow no higher once they have thrown out branches, but the girth spreads with the centuries

until you see a monstrous growth which is not without beauty when in flower. This is the tree which exudes the celebrated blood red juice known to commerce as "dragon's blood". Guanches mummified their dead and preserved their leather with it. They worshipped the tree. When it blossomed (a rare event) they expected good harvests. When a dragon tree fell at last it was regarded as a calamity. Venetian ladies owed their famous golden hair to a dye in which dragon's blood was the main ingredient. Apothecaries in Europe valued it and charged heavily for the medicines they made. Dissolved in spirits of wine, dragon's blood was still being used late last century as a cure for stomach troubles and skin ulcers. Toothpicks made from the timber are supposed to be good for the gums.

Icod's dragon tree escaped the streams of lava that once flowed through the lovely village of Icod de los Vinos. The circumference is forty feet and its age has been estimated at three thousand years. Thus it is easy to imagine the Guanche warriors gathering round the huge trunk for their religious ceremonies. But the Oratava tree had a greater reputation. That was the tree of the legendary

dragon that guarded the Gardens of the Hesperides. No doubt the golden apples of the story were the oranges that still grow in the valley.

Sir Joseph Hooker traced plants allied to the dragon tree in Abyssinia. He believed it was descended from the extinct dragon tree of the Atlas mountains in the Sahara, and that pigeons had carried seeds to the islands. Today the tree is rare in the wild state, and it is almost extinct in the other islands where it is indigenous; Madeira, Porto Santa and the Cape Verdes. However, many dragon trees flourish in private gardens and only when you want to see the old monsters do you have to drive for miles.

“El drago” is a great tree indeed. I came across an old description of dragon’s blood which ran: “The gum which the tree sweats out without cutting is the best and is called ‘blood by the drop’. It is very good for medicine, for sealing letters and for making the teeth red.” If you are fond of souvenirs, ask the gardener for “a son of the great one” and he will present you with a dragon tree one inch high.

Adventure has many faces, and one that I always enjoy takes the shape of a foreign menu. I am no linguist, but I always learn the names of local dishes

so that no remarkable novelty shall pass untasted. Naturally, there are misunderstandings. One night in a Las Palmas restaurant I inquired: “What time do you serve dinner?” (The Spanish dine late, and few sit down before nine.) To my surprise the waiter answered: “*Si señor*, there are some very nice *sonritas* here.” I take my meals seriously, and do not like having my thoughts distracted in this way.

Among the free entertainments of the world that I never miss are the markets. You see meat only once or twice a week in Las Palmas market, but they compensate themselves by eating a great variety of cheap fish, from octopus to tunny. They claim that their oranges from Telde, their Hierro figs and Lanzarote watermelons are the finest on earth. And the goat cheeses of these islands are not to be despised.

English breakfasts of eggs and bacon are unknown here. Some of the islanders start the day with a luscious hot powdered chocolate drink flavoured with cinnamon. *Café con leche* is more usual, the strong coffee and milk of the continent, accompanied by a sweet or plain roll called a *bollo*.

All over these islands the great dish of the poor people (and few are rich) is *gofio*. It is *gofio* that you smell in city streets, in the tiled cottages of the country, in the caves that still serve as dwellings. *Gofio* was the food of the Guanches. Strip a mealie cob, grind and roast it, eat it dry or with water or hot milk and sugar. Wheat, barley and rye are also used. *Gofio* is eaten today in the exact Guanche manner. Sometimes it is spread on bread or used to thicken the soup. *Gofio* is found as an ingredient in many island dishes.

Octopus and squid, which I saw at the market, appear on the menu as *calamares*, and many a conservative tourist must order and enjoy these delicacies without knowing what he is eating. Octopus is tough if you do not know how to cook it. Canario chefs simmer their octopus in olive oil and white wine, adding onions, chopped parsley and breadcrumbs. It is also rolled in flour, fried in hot oil and served with tomato sauce or lemon and plain rice.

Caldo de pescado is a typical fish dish of the Canary islands. The fish is cooked and coloured yellow with saffron, and served with *gofio* and potatoes. Another traditional fish course is

Sanchocho Canario, consisting of salt fish lavishly flavoured with garlic and accompanied by sweet potatoes and tomatoes. You will probably find *El Mojo* sauce with this dish, a blend of hot spices, salt, olive oil and vinegar.

Now for the meat. Even the leading hotels offer only a small choice of meat courses, with the emphasis on veal and poultry. An island dish for *fiestas* is *cabrito en adobo*, kid soaked in wine and vinegar, rubbed with garlic, roasted and decorated with red peppers. There is also the economical but tasty stew called *puchero*, in which the meat and sausages go a long way among the many vegetables. They call it *olla podrida* in Spain.

Herbs and spices, sauces made of crushed walnuts and hazel nuts, sherry and grated cheese make the incessant veal more interesting. The Spanish like vivid and highly-seasoned dishes. Often the colours are as bright as the scarlet of Spanish skirts. *Bueno!* Pork is often the alternative to veal. A genuine luxury, served only in the most expensive hotels, is *jamon terrano*, the dark red mountain ham which is dried in the sun on the snow. The curing process is controlled by the snow, which prevents the ham from being spoilt.

Everyone knows *paella*, a mixed dish which varies according to the whim of the cook and the ingredients available. All sorts of titbits are laid on a bed of yellow rice – flakes of fish, scraps of chicken, meat and shellfish, pimento and peas. It should come to the table straight from the stove in the iron pan.

A popular vegetable which I enjoyed immensely was heart of globe artichoke. Fried bananas appeared occasionally, but the Canarios usually prefer their bananas raw. The basic vegetables in Spain and in the Canaries are lentils, dried beans and large yellow chick peas. Even a peasant can afford a stew of beans with little blood sausages.

Dinner starts with soup, and a summer favourite is *gaspacho*, an iced soup which the newcomer might confuse with the salad. It is a blend of pounded tomatoes, chopped cucumber, onions, green peppers, breadcrumbs, oil and vinegar and garlic. An egg dish follows, and though the Spanish omelette, fried in olive oil, lacks the subtlety of the French omelette, it can be very satisfying. You may have fish again at dinner, the local *sama* with almond sauce.

Then the chicken with huge haricot beans cooked in butter and creole rice. Bananas and ice cream. Or possibly one of the local sweets made of honey and almonds, or almonds and eggs. Among the local fruits is the *pomorosa*, which tastes like roses. The fruit of the peasants is called *higos picos*, and is recognised immediately by South Africans as the prickly pear with its juicy ball of green jelly.

Bars and cafes in the Canaries provide their patrons with free snacks which would drive any South African hotelkeeper livid with rage. Order a sherry and you receive a plate of olives stuffed with anchovies, a dish of peanuts and another of sliced beetroot, and a generous portion of tunny fish. Many appetising little sausages known as *salchicha* also arrive with the drinks.

They make a sweet, mild rum in the Canary Islands, bottled with a sprig of some herb. Eugene Pavillard declared that it shared with Scotch whisky the valuable property of failing to produce a headache even when taken unwisely. I preferred the manzanilla and the sherries, the finos and amontillados. Rioja, a rough claret, accompanied many of my meals. I also enjoyed an island wine with an unusual pineapple flavour called Palma; a

full-bodied red Teneriffe wine, Acentejo; and a white wine made on the Hierro hills, certainly not light. Many local wines cost only three shillings a bottle. Most of the Spanish brandy is sweeter than French or South African brandy, and you must ask for *soberano* to secure a dry variety.

Teneriffe and Grand Canary are the islands where the liners call, the islands of great hotels and remarkable menus; but there are five more isles in this archipelago. Some have aerodromes, if you must hurry. Gomera and Hierro are so mountainous that they can only be reached by the little Spanish inter-island packet that carried me round the group.

La Palma (which must not be confused with Las Palmas) is a beautiful island, and if you have travelled south with Captain Lloyd in the Winchester Castle you have probably seen the capital, Santa Cruz de la Palma, on its steep mountainside. (Captain Lloyd also gives you a close view of Hierro.) La Palma has the largest volcanic crater in the world, the Gran Caldera, seven thousand feet deep with green trees at the bottom.

In a barranco on this island stands a stone ship. This ship is rigged and decorated every five years, and

islanders of La Palma who have settled in other parts of the world do their utmost to attend the religious ceremony and the fiesta.

Gomera, with its sheltered port of San Sebastian and rich lands, has been coveted and attacked by the fleets of many nations. It was the favourite harbour of the old navigators, including Columbus. Many a Portuguese caravel and Spanish galleon set out from there for coasts unknown and seas uncharted. The people of Gomera possess a whistling language, and I must take you there to hear it.

Fuerteventura is a large island, but remains in a primitive state owing to the almost entire absence of fresh water. During a rainy year, however, wonderful crops of wheat are raised. Here camels may be seen on the farms, the only form of transport possible in dry seasons. Lanzarote, too, has desert stretches resembling the Sahara. There was a volcanic eruption in 1824, when showers of red-hot stones were blown out of a new crater. On this island an execution pit is preserved, a relic of the grim days when a condemned person was left to die of hunger or thirst. The choice of food or water was given. It is said that one wily criminal chose milk, and remained alive for so long that the custom

was abolished.

Hierro, last of the seven islands, used to be regarded as the most western point of the world. To the botanist it is the most interesting island of all, for the population is small and there is a wealth of plant life. The figs of Hierro which I mentioned earlier grow in a manner peculiar to the island. Each straggling tree is allowed to cover a large area and lives for centuries within its special wall, bearing a weight of figs unknown elsewhere. One tree may bear four hundred pounds. Thus a farmer with a large family may leave one branch of a huge fig tree to each child. Such legacies are valuable. In lean times poor Herenos live on *gofio* and dried figs. Close to the north-west coast of Hierro are some rocks which are the only home of a species of giant lizard. Males run up to twenty-one inches. They are harmless. In the past they were hunted for food. I saw a live specimen but no roast lizard while I was in Hierro. You will call at Hierro with me presently.

Some of the Canary islanders will tell you they have seen an eighth island to the westward of the group, the miraculous island of St. Brandon. Many early explorers sought for this terrestrial paradise; and belief in its existence was once so firm that

when Portugal ceded the Canaries to Spain in 1519 the "*isla nao truvota*" (island not found) was included in the treaty. The mystery is easily explained, however, for reliable observers have seen mirages on the horizon from La Palma and Teneriffe, mirages so clear-cut that they could well have been mistaken for land. But do not contradict the Canary people when they speak of St. Brandon. With some of them it is an article of faith.

What other memories of those islands linger in the theatre of the mind? Strange how some great scenes fade while small experiences which seemed without significance remain in all their vivid colours, and even with their sounds.

I remember the young bootblack who lured me boldly off the narrow pavement into the hall of a private house on Triana, where he could work undisturbed. As he polished, a servant girl with huge earrings scrubbed the stairs and sang. The bootblack winked at me, and I shall recall that wink all my life.

I handed my laundry to a maid at the hotel, and she said: "Manana." Then I sat in a red leather chair drinking Tio Pepe in a low-roofed bar with fine

dark timber studded with brass, a marble floor beneath. I read a London newspaper bearing the previous day's date, and put it down lazily to watch the men in grey sweeping the banana fronds in the park.

Sauntering round the docks (one of my favourite amusements) I watched the mechanics stripping a German U-boat which had been scuttled off Grand Canary and salvaged. What a contrast she made with the Spanish schooners close by, the sailing craft that fish in the waters off the western Sahara. Long seine nets hung in the rigging. They were landing their haul of salted bonito and mullet, caught in the richest fishing ground in the world.

"*Salud y amor y pesetas!*" said Eugene Pavillard, raising his glass. "Health, love and money." A lot to ask.

"Vamos!" calls the conductor on the motor-buses known as guaguas (pronounced "wa-was") running between the puerto and the city. "Vamos! Vamos! Vamos!" All day long, a thousand times a day. So gentle, utterly different from signalling to the driver with a bell. "Vamos!" And the bus moves on again.

One night in the Santa Catalina courtyard

something flashed in the darkness, and flashed and flashed again. A girl on a swing, with diamond earrings and a young *caballero* beside her. Life goes well for some people in the islands.

Birds everywhere, driven in by the gales of the ages to find refuge and evolve new species. Canarian woodpeckers in the pine forests, kites and vultures on the heights. But the bird that left the clearest picture on my screen of memory was a large seabird, the *pardela*, the great Canarian shearwater that flies in from the ocean to breed in the remote *barrancos* of these islands. The weird call of the *pardela* is a sound every islander knows.

I collect memories rather than the ordinary travel souvenirs apart from books and menus and bottles of wine. However, I did take one card supplied to guests by the finest hotel in the islands. One of those cards you hang on your door when you do not wish to be disturbed. This one said it in Spanish as well, so neatly that it might well become a beachcomber's motto: "*No molestar.*" That is the code of the islands.

Chapter 19

WHISTLERS OF GOMERA

IF YOU wish to find an Atlantic isle where people talk like the birds you must leave the tourist resorts of the Canary group and steam westwards to Gomera. The whistling language of Gomera has come down through the centuries from the dark past. It is one of the unknown wonders of human ingenuity. Nowhere else in the world is there a real whistling language. The *silbo gomero*, as linguists are beginning to call it, is truly unique. It is no code, but a distinct and accurate language based on phonetics, the very sounds of Spanish words. I only wish you could hear the Gomerans whistling over the water, in the streets of the port, and above all, in the mountains.

“Hasta la vista! Hasta luego! Volvere otra vez! Adio!” (I cannot reproduce the sound of those whistled words, though I believe it can be done in terms of music.) That was my first experience of the language. Midnight, and Gomerans on board the inter-island steamer *Leon y Castillo* were whistling farewell to other Gomerans on the Las Palmas wharf as we pulled out.

I met with great kindness in this nine-hundred ton ship. Her captain knew why I was going to Gomera, and he made it possible for me to hear some of the most expert whistlers on the island. Then there was Pepe, a bearded sailor with earrings who looked like a Spanish pirate. Pepe told me that he was born on Gomera and that he had learned English in New York. Soon he was to give me the most dramatic whistling demonstration of all.

That sailor was the only man in the crowded ship who did speak fluent English, but someone always offered me wine at meals and I felt at home on board. She had five classes: superior first with a private toilet, first, second, third and deck. Two hundred passengers travelled on deck, with their goats and pigs, fowls and cats. Two hundred men, women and children. Some had guitars and lovely voices. Some were soldiers in Franco's grey uniform. Some were girls who were being sent home by order of the mayor of Las Palmas after the closing of the red light district. Some had wicker demijohns of wine. It was a situation O. Henry would have relished. Somerset Maugham might have glanced into the massed humanity of the aft deck and proved once more, in his quiet yet

inevitable manner, that things are not what they seem.

When the *Leon y Castillo* lurched away from the wharf with this cargo she was listing uncomfortably to port, and soon she was rolling. In the morning, when I came up through the red plush lounge, she was still listing, and hanging at the end of the roll in a way seamen hate. Singers and guitarists, soldiers and girls were silent, and it was clear that there would be no more whistling until we came into the shelter of Gomera. Do not take the little *Leon y Castillo* if you fear seasickness. Charter a helicopter.

No ordinary aircraft has ever landed on Gomera, and you can understand it when you sight the cliffs and ravines of the island. At the same moment you realise why the need for the whistling language arose. Gomera is a round, volcanic, mountainous island where thirty thousand people live in four small towns, a number of villages and on isolated farms. It has one motor-road and many rough goat-tracks. The island is fourteen miles in diameter, cut up by the wide, steep ravines called barrancos. Men cannot make themselves heard by shouting across those torrent beds, and it might take hours of

climbing and much effort to reach a friend on the far side. So they whistle. Like all languages this one must have started in prehistoric times with the expression of only the simplest thoughts. It has now become so elaborate that anything which can be said in Spanish can also be whistled.

Yet the original whistlers were not Spaniards. They were the Guanches, the mysterious, fair and blue-eyed people who were in possession of the Canary Islands when the French and Spanish invaders arrived early in the fifteenth century. Jean de Bethencourt, the Norman, who secured Gomera and other islands for Henry III of Castile, had two observant priests with him. Here are the words of the priests: "Gomera is a country of tall people who speak the most remarkable of all the languages of these islands, and speak with their lips as if they had no tongues. And they have a tradition that a great prince, for no fault of theirs, caused them to be banished and had their tongues cut out. Judging by the way they speak, one could well believe it. The island abounds in dragon-trees and other kinds of wood, and in small cattle. There are also many other notable things which it would be tedious to describe."



No ordinary aircraft has ever landed on Gomera, and you can understand it when you sight the cliffs and ravines of the island.

Espinosa, an old Spanish historian, gave another version of the legend. "Some say the people of the Canaries are descended from certain tribes in Africa, who rose against the Romans and killed their praetor, or judge," Espinosa recorded. "As a punishment for this, instead of killing them all, some had their tongues cut out. Having no pens or paper, they could not hand down an account of the rising. They were then put into boats without oars and committed to the sea and to their fate. These exiles came to the islands and peopled them."

There may be some truth in the legend, but it is certain that a man without a tongue could not whistle like the Gomerans. In another passage the priests said that the women of Gomera were the most beautiful of all in the Canaries, but also the most immoral. The people spent most of their time singing and dancing, as it was easy to make a living. They had goats and goats' milk, pigs, herbs, roots and fish. After the conquest, however, only about one thousand of these easy-going island people remained, and they had been driven into the mountains.

So the Guanches passed away at last as a pure race, and their language vanished. But long before they

died out or mixed with the Spaniards, they had taught the conquerors to whistle. The principles which enabled men to whistle in the Guanche language were transferred to Spanish, and the islanders went on talking across the ravines.

San Sebastian, the port of Gomera, is built on the flat land in a ravine half a mile broad where it meets the sea in a horseshoe bay. Black, volcanic sand on the beach, date palms and dark green tamarisks, a white fort and low, cool houses with red roofs and green shutters; all these make San Sebastian memorable. This is the most beautiful little port in the Canaries, yet it is almost unknown, like the whistling language. Three long parallel streets lead up the barranco for half a mile. Then the barranco becomes a bright pattern of tomato plantations and lemon trees, black pepper and sweet potatoes, until it narrows and turns away into the mountains.

My friend the captain of the *Leon y Cartillo* provided letters of introduction and sent Pepe on shore with me. Soon I was in good hands. Senor Juan Arbona Noguera, the port official, and Senor Guillermo Moreno Fernandez, the bank manager, took me round the town and arranged all sorts of whistling demonstrations in the streets.

Now it is a fact that the shepherds of the Montana de Chipude district are the most highly-skilled whistlers in Gomera. Probably the language arose in that region. But travellers who have attempted to describe the language were wrong when they declared that few townsfolk could whistle. I carried out tests which convinced me that people of both sexes and all ages could send and receive simple messages. This is no lost art in San Sebastian, but an everyday mode of speech.

I picked a little girl at random from a group round a doorway. "Could she whistle?" I asked. My interpreters spoke, and that little girl stood in the road and whistled a man's name with low, clear notes, liquid and very appealing, like the voice of a nightingale. "Antonio Evaristo," she whistled. "Antonio Evaristo." And as the second call ended a man far down the street turned round and shot out his right arm to show he had heard. That is the invariable method; the name of the person who is wanted, and the recognition signal.

"All right, Antonio Evaristo, you may go ... I don't want you after all," whistled the little girl. Antonio gave a bewildered gesture and walked on. No one else in the street, apart from Antonio and my little

group, took the slightest notice of the incident.

I collected two male volunteers, walked down to the beach and set them far apart. An amused crowd gathered round me as I gave my friends various messages to be transmitted to the man who was out of shouting range. I made them laugh by telling the man to pull out his shirt; and they laughed heartily when he made the mistake of taking off a shoe instead of his hat. These men were not experts. They promised to find an expert for me, and assured me that I would not be disappointed."

That day I heard many forms of useful whistling. Down in the town there was a plant which pumped water up to the plateau to irrigate tomato and banana plantations. It was an intricate system, but every detail of the work was controlled by messages whistled between the pumping station and the plateau.

A cafe waitress whistled every order to the cook in the kitchen, every course from potato soup to pancakes in sweet sauce. My friends told me that she could tell the cook how each patron wished to have his eggs done. She could call for *vino corriente* or *café con leche*, and I could appreciate



That little girl stood in the road and whistled a man's name with low, clear notes, liquid and very appealing, like the voice of a nightingale.

the fact that the sweet whistling was more melodious than many café voices.

Parents whistle messages to their children on this island, and every baby responds to its *silbo* name before it is a year old. Children learn to whistle messages as naturally as they whistle tunes. It comes to them like normal speech. "You can recognise a person's whistle in the same way that you know a familiar voice," they told me. "There is character in a whistle."

If a car breaks down on a lonely road the driver is often successful in whistling up someone who will relay a whistled message to the nearest garage. Fishermen whistle from boat to boat, passing on information about the tunny shoals and their catches. When ships are being loaded in the island anchorages, all the working arrangements are made by whistle messages. This is especially valuable at those loading places along the coast, such as Hermigua, where the shore is so steep that an iron structure has to be used with a cradle for lowering passengers and freight into open boats.

Many parts of Gomera are still without telephones, and the whistlers have been saving lives for years in

medical emergencies. Once a doctor was needed urgently at the fishing station of Cantera in the south of the island. Cantera lies in a bay which is isolated by precipices, and it can only be reached easily by sea. Within six minutes a doctor in San Sebastian knew that he was wanted at Cantera, and moreover he had details of the symptoms. Five men, fishermen and shepherds, had relayed the message in daylight along about nine miles of coast. When a medical specialist is needed urgently he is flown in from Las Palmas by helicopter; for, as I have said, there is nowhere for other aircraft to land on mountainous Gomera.

One famous tale which has been told with glee in Gomera for half a century describes the cunning of a wealthy landowner in San Sebastian whose farms were in the south. Land is worked on a share system, the owner being entitled to his *medias* in sheep and pigs. This landowner suspected that he was not receiving his fair share, but he could never prove it. Of course his tenants always knew he was arriving on a visit, as the first man whistled the news to the others.

At last the landowner decided to take lessons in whistling. On his next visit he was able to compile a

list of all the pigs and cows, goats and sheep, that had been hidden as he made his way from tenant to tenant. Tax-collectors still have a difficult time in Gomera, for their movements are always whistled, and always there are debtors who cannot be found.

Mr. Patrick Duncan, a son of the late Sir Patrick Duncan, Governor-General of South Africa, spent some weeks on Gomera shortly before World War II. He did a great deal of riding. In the interior of the island, when he needed a horse, it was usually possible to whistle for one. Mr. Duncan, who spoke Spanish, took lessons in the whistling language and soon learned to send and receive simple messages. He met an aged Englishman, head of a wealthy family, who had lost nearly all his money and settled in Gomera because he could live there on a few shillings a day. This pathetic exile undoubtedly knew more about the whistling language than any other foreigner, but his knowledge died with him.

Mr. Andre Classe, lecturer in phonetics at Glasgow University, spent three months in Gomera not long ago, and in that time he and his wife were able to master the elements of the *silbo gomero*. He is the authority on the language outside the island and he has dealt fully with the mechanism in “Archivum

Linguisticum” and other scientific journals.

In letters to me Mr. Classe emphasised that there was nothing mysterious about the *silbo gomero*. It is simply a form of Spanish, whereas other whistled forms of tone languages (heard in Mexico and Africa) are so inherently lacking in accuracy that they amount to codes.

“All the *silbador* has to do is to stick the tip of his tongue against his teeth, start whistling and at the same time try to articulate words as if he were speaking normally,” explains Mr. Classe. “He can whistle intelligibly everything he can say in Spanish.”

The whistler uses only his tongue to vary the pitch. His lips, and his fingers if he uses them, remain static. Of course the context gives the receiver essential help in making sense of a message. Certain single words might never be understood. Moreover, a long conversation usually includes a few errors and requests for repetitions. Errors there must be in a language depending entirely on pitch, without variation of tone quality.

Mr. Classe had a weird experience in one of the high forests of this island where the people talk like

the birds. There were no human beings within miles of Mr. and Mrs Classe; yet they kept hearing Spanish names being whistled close at hand – Felipe! Alfonso! Frederico! Maria de los Angeles! Mr. Classe traced the whistling to the blackbirds, fine song-birds which were imitating the human calls they had so often heard.

Why, you may well ask, is the art of whistling a language peculiar to this one island? First of all because of the difficult terrain, which I have described. Secondly, because Spanish lends itself admirably to whistling; more so perhaps than any other tongue. Other languages, I suppose, might be adapted so that very simple messages could be transmitted; but the Spanish phonetics allow the full range of expression. Factors which aid the Gomeran *silbador* are the excellent acoustics in the ravines and his own keen sense of hearing. Most of the islanders have good teeth, a great asset enabling some of them to emit sounds more like steam whistles than a rush of human breath.

What is the greatest distance a Gomeran *silbador* can cover? Mr. Classe found many whistlers who could make themselves heard three miles away. He was informed that the island record was eight miles;

and while he thought this claim might have been exaggerated, he was not prepared to dismiss it entirely.

Mr. A. Samler Brown, a reliable authority on the Canary Islands, visited Gomera early this century and stated that some peasants could make themselves heard over three or four miles. He also quoted an old traveller who declared that an early English traveller persuaded a Guanche to whistle into his ear, and the Englishman was rendered deaf for fifteen days!

All my informants agreed that it was necessary to place a bent finger against the tongue when whistling over long distances. Most whistlers used a finger of the right hand for the purpose while the left hand formed a sounding board alongside the mouth.

Visitors to Gomera who have studied the *silbo gomero* have made the sad prediction that it would soon be heard no more. Some declared the telephone would kill it. When the first motor road was built from San Sebastian to Hermigua and other places in the interior in 1935, an American scientist said there would be a duel between whistling and

the motor-horn, and the whistling language would be crushed to death beneath the wheels of trucks. Fortunately no such disaster has occurred. Gomera is an island of whistlers, and new uses are still being found for the romantic old language.

Now and again a word from the extinct and almost unknown Guanche language crops up in the *silbo gomero*. Lajard, a French linguist, visited Gomera at the end of last century in the hope of learning something of Guanche from the whistling language, but he was disappointed. Dr. E. A. Hooton of Harvard, a later investigator, came to the conclusion that the whistling language had also been used by the Guanches in Teneriffe before the Spanish conquest. Lajard was unable to find any Grand Canary islander who was familiar with the whistling language.

I went on in the *Leon y Castillo* to Hierro, smallest and most remote island of the Canary group. My visit to this queer outpost had a sequel when the ship returned to Gomera; nothing less than a vivid personal experience of the range of the whistling language. Thus I am not digressing when I recall the details of a memorable night.

Hierro is so steep that it has no coastal town, but merely a boat harbour called rather grandly the Puerto de la Valverde. Not so long ago they were hauling passengers and cargo up the face of a cliff in a wire cage. Now there is a motor-road cut into the cliff running up two thousand feet to Valverde, the capital, six miles away. And what a frightening road it is!

I had told my friend Pepe, the piratical sailor, that I was looking forward to tasting the wine of Hierro, and I also mentioned the lizards and the dried figs. Pepe must have told some of the passengers for Hierro to look after me. When I landed at the mole these hospitable Herrenos showed me into a bus and insisted on paying my fare to Valverde.

The bus ride was an interlude of terror for me, as there was no wall beside the road, and the precipice dropped sheer into the sea. On the corners the driver sometimes turned his head to gossip with a friend. White crosses beside the road marked the scenes of fatal accidents, for such is the Spanish custom. I could see the lights of a tiny *Leon y Castillo* far below me, and wondered whether I would ever tread her decks again.

Thus I was ready for the glass of wine which was offered to me when the bus stopped at an inn somewhere in terraced Valverde. My island friends brought in a beaming, chubby Spaniard who was introduced to me with some difficulty as the *alcalde* or mayor. A deaf-and-dumb man was presented. I became aware of faces peering in at every window, and then realised that an English speaking visitor was a rarity and an object of interest.

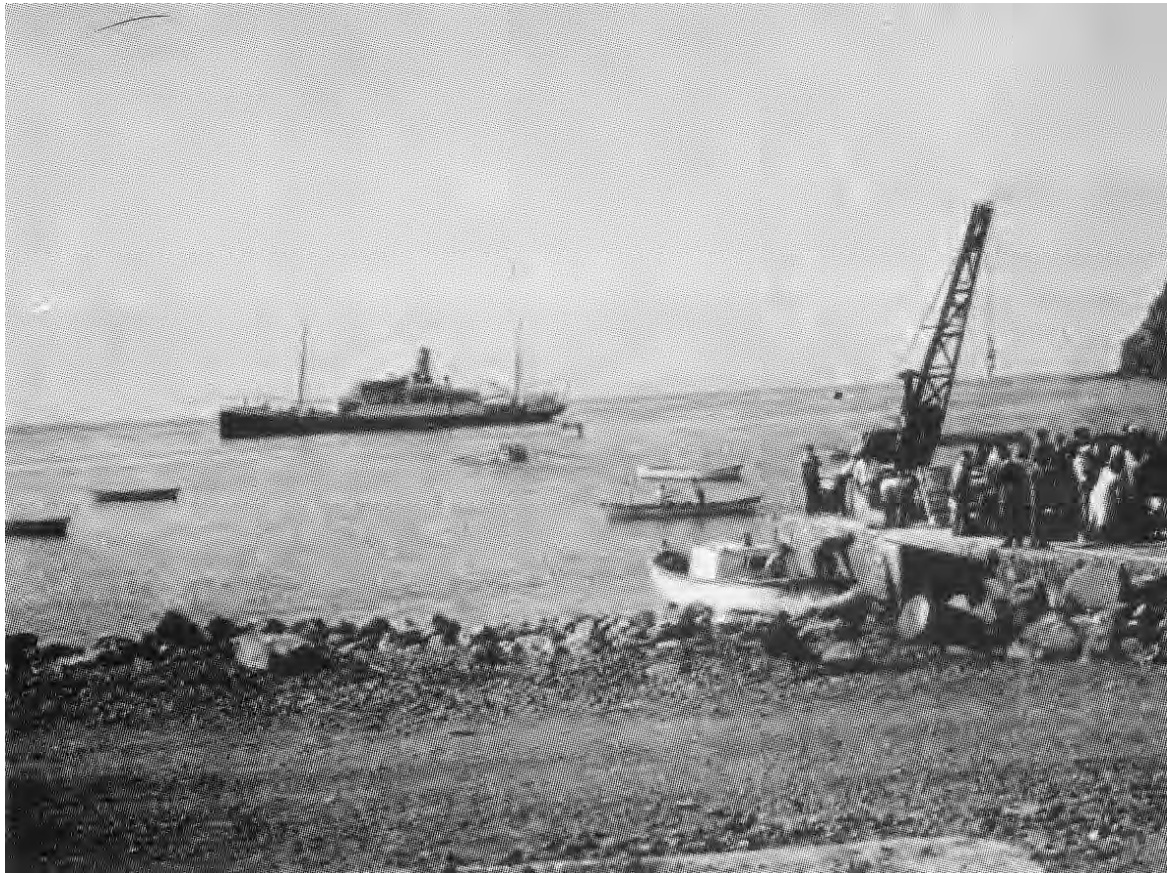
At last I was able to call for a round of wine, and the enthusiasm became so great that I almost forgot the precipice between me and the ship. Someone brought me a packet of figs, which I had forgotten; and the deaf-and-dumb man hurried out and came back with a lizard almost two feet in length. He conveyed the fact that it would not bite, and I admired the giant, certainly one of the wonders of Hierro. Then the bus hooted outside and my hour in Valverde was over. I had fortified myself against the perilous return. The journey became a joke rather than an ordeal. I thanked the people of Valverde, and I told Pepe the pirate about it when I regained the *Leon y Cartillo* alive.

After a night at sea the ship (no longer listing) came once more to the quiet anchorage that Columbus

loved at San Sebastian de Gomera. She was to spend the day there loading bananas and casks of wine, but I went off with the first launch to meet my Gomeran friend who could speak English, and hear more of the whistling language.

Pepe was in the bows of the launch. No sooner had we left the ship's side than he called up an invisible person in the brown on the distant jetty. I heard the "call sign" acknowledged, and then Pepe really went into action. He finished before the launch reached the steps. I jumped off, to be greeted by Juan the port official and Guillermo the bank manager. And as we walked to the cafe under the laurel trees on the Calvo Sotelo plaza, Juan told me that he was not surprised to hear that I had not enjoyed the ride up to Valverde, but he hoped the wine and figs were some compensation. As my look of surprise grew into astonishment he added other details of my Hierro visit.

I had forgotten Pepe's whistling. They had plotted this supreme demonstration with Pepe before the ship had left for Hierro. They had arranged for an old man, an expert whistler nicknamed "Palomo" (the pigeon), to be on the jetty with them when I returned to interpret Pepe's message.



After a night at sea the ship came once more to the quiet anchorage that Columbus loved at San Sebastian de Gomera.

“Palomo” joined us at the cafe. He had fought in Cuba during the Spanish-American War, but he was still at work although he was over eighty. A strong man is “Palomo”, and only a year or so ago he could carry a load of one hundred kilos on his back. He is also a strong whistler, though he complained that the recent loss of his front teeth had shortened his range.

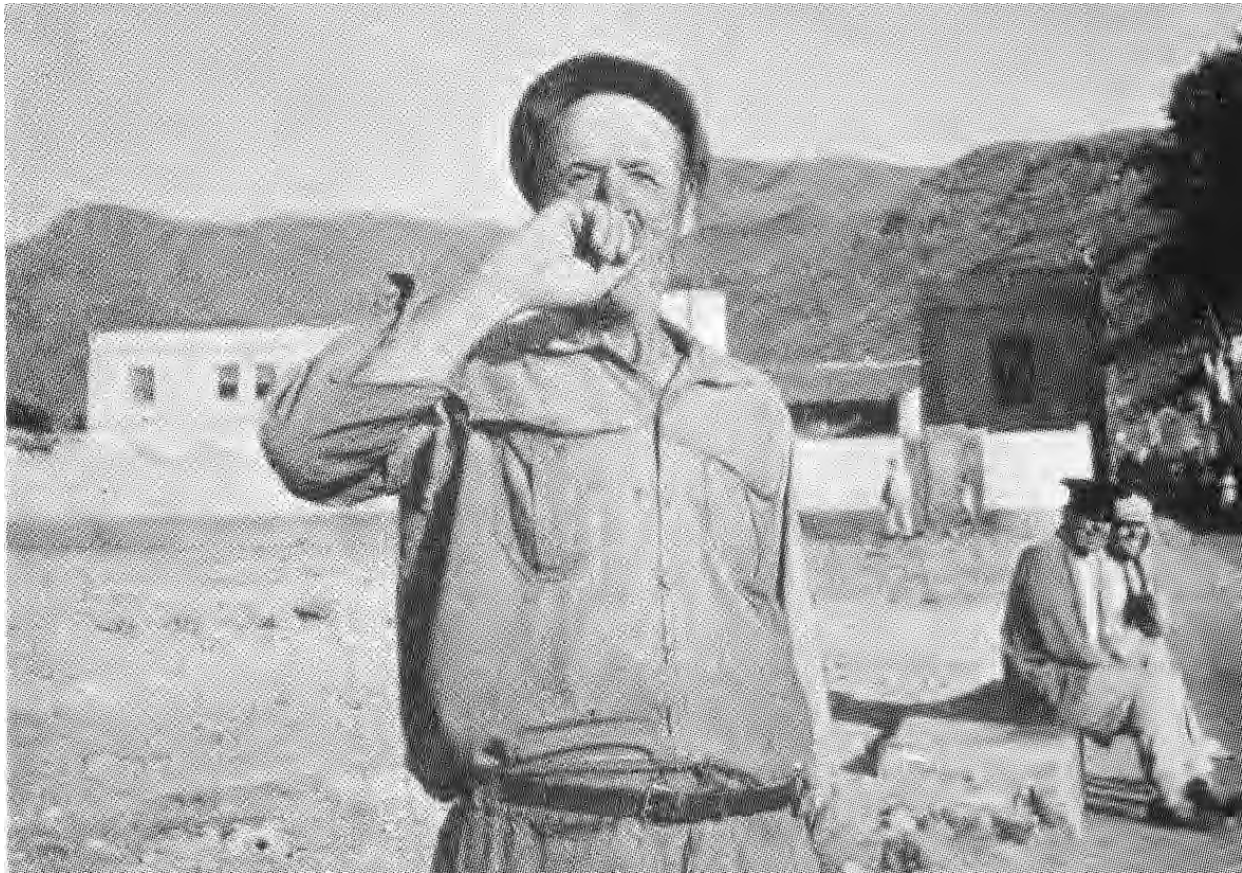
I encouraged these men to talk of great occasions on which the *silbo gomero* had been used. Juan said reflectively that every page in the island story had been whistled from the coast into the mountains and down again to the most remote bay.

I remembered that the little girl who had whistled to Antonio Evaristo had stood outside the house in which Christopher Columbus had slept on his last night in the Old World before setting sail on his greatest voyage. Certainly the departure of the Santa Maria, the Pinto and the Nina would have been reported by the whistlers. And much more ... the love affair of Columbus and Beatriz y Bobadilla of Gomera ... the loading of the ships of Columbus with calves and goats, sheep and pigs, fowls and fruit. Later this island supplied the sugar-cane that transformed the West Indies. So there was much

news for the relays of whistlers in the days of Columbus.

But, as I said, this art comes from the dark past. I can imagine the Guanches whistling long, long ago as they swam in the shallows, driving the fish shoals into basket traps. Those must have been happy centuries, the years before the cruel invader exterminated a pleasant, harmless people. Many of the Guanches threw themselves over the cliffs rather than live under the invaders, and you may be sure the tragedy was whistled to every corner of the island.

When the Gomerans rose against heavy taxes and wicked governors such as Peraza, it was the whistling language that called the rebels together. When the ships under Drake attacked San Sebastian, when the Dutch came five years later, the whistlers called up the defenders and drove off these enemies. Algerian pirates sacked San Sebastian early in the seventeenth century and left many houses in flames – grim news for the whistlers to spread. When great storms raged and all the ravines were filled with torrents, when ships were lost and fishermen were blown out to sea, the island depended entirely on the whistlers for news.



A strong man is Palomo ... he is also a strong whistler, though he complained that the recent loss of his front teeth had shortened his range.

And during the Spanish Civil War, when Franco's opponents took to the mountains, whistled messages announced that the men who had established themselves with machine-guns in the impregnable Roque Agandos had been forced to surrender owing to hunger and thirst.

Probably the most famous whistling display ever organised in Gomera was given in 1906, when King Alfonso XIII paid a visit soon after the attempted assassination on his wedding day. Alfonso did not believe the stories he had heard of the whistling language. Two soldiers in the local militia convinced him that he had not been deceived, in spite of a few errors. One of these soldiers, who stood next to Alfonso, received a message which was intended to mean: "Take your hat off." The soldier whipped off Alfonso's hat by mistake. However, both men asked for their release from the army as a reward for their skill, and this was granted. The fact that the King of Spain should have heard about the whistling language only when he landed at San Sebastian is significant. Even now very little of this remarkable art is known in Spain, and Spanish scientists appear to have overlooked it.

Gomera is a mysterious name and no one can be

sure of the origin. But there was a Gumero tribe in the mountains of the Sahara whence the ancestors of the Guanche people must have come. In those mountains, according to one old writer, there dwelt a race who knew the whistling language. That may be true, though I think the marvellous art of whistling words grew up in Gomera because of the ravines. And now, for the rest of my life, any peculiar whistle will always remind me of that island of laden camels and tiny donkeys, the beehives made of hollow palm trunks, the sardines and tunny, the mauve flowers called *trepadora* and the women in black veils entering the old church where Columbus prayed. "I know of few places so entirely shut away from the world, and which convey such an impression of complete isolation," wrote a British scientist who went to Gomera early this century to study the birds. It has not changed much since then.

Many of the poor Gomera folk emigrate nowadays to Venezuela, which they regard as a South American paradise, just as older generations of Gomerans left their beloved island for Cuba. I saw the emigrants embracing their wives and mothers on the jetty at San Sebastian, and climbing sadly on

board the *Leon y Castillo* with their pathetic bundles.

As the anchor came up they made their misery keener by bringing out guitars and singing the Malaguena, and the Tajaraste with tambourine accompaniment. Indeed they were sad guitars, and the emotional music as I heard it that day must have been almost unbearable for some of the listeners. But there came a sound that drew me away from the tearful players. I traced it to the cliff above San Sebastian, a sound that must have started with a blast like escaping steam. It came over the water to cut through the music with insistent tones and syllables that could not be denied. A man rose from his rolled blankets on the deck and answered. His friend was saying farewell and the man who was going into exile replied across a full mile of sea. *Volvere otra vez!* I'll come back one day. *Adio!*

Chapter 20

ISLAND OF DIVING BOYS

NOW IT is Madeira again. Another old desire is becoming a reality. Madeira, island of rich wines, rare fruits and fish, where first and last impressions must always be the diving boys. No matter when you arrive, in daylight or in darkness, they are there crying out for money.

“Six-a-pence, captain – heave six-a-pence in de water.”

“Small boy dive, sare – t’row shillin’ for small boy!”

“Haffa-crown, sare! Haffa-crown for high dive.”

My friend Senhor Afonso Coelho, a former member of the Funchal harbour board, told me that the diving started about a century ago, when passenger steamers began calling regularly at the island. “It was no use before that, because sailor men in windjammers had no money to throw away,” declared Coelho.

Most of the diving boys are sons of harbour workers. Each boat holds two boys, as a rule, and the takings are split into three equal shares, the third

going to the owner of the boat. “If each boy brings one pound sterling on shore with him, that’s a good day’s work,” Coelho assured me. “It takes a lot of diving to make as much as that.”

At night the coppers are usually lost. Silver coins reflect the light of the torches used by the boys and they are easily recovered. Still, there must be a fortune in small change lying on the floor of Funchal bay.

Coelho says the diving boys are not fast swimmers, and any good amateur could beat them in a race over one hundred metres. The divers are “hop and jump” experts, swimming only a few strokes at a time and resting as much as possible between dives. “I have never heard of a diving boy being drowned or killed by a propeller, or being injured seriously while high diving,” Coelho remarked.

High diving calls for real skill, and I have seen boys hurtling fifty feet into the water from the boat-deck when there were a good many small craft manoeuvring alongside. Yet they always found a clear space and came up unscathed.

Diving under a ship is a feat which only a few of the boys can perform. It means swimming down,

down, down interminably with eyes wide open and breath held painfully. He must work at an angle to save time, forcing himself down, down to as much as thirty-six feet below the surface. Then comes the turn of the bilge, the flat bottom of the ship, and faint daylight on the far side. If his nerve fails now he is trapped below a ship which may have a beam of ninety feet. He swims on, the darkness turns blue, and then he comes at last into the fresh air. All this for a couple of shillings.

How long can a diving boy hold his breath under water? The average is probably about one minute – which seems a long time below the surface. The expert may remain down for ninety seconds. No one can stand it for much more than one hundred seconds.

Diving is controlled nowadays. Every boy must be at least fourteen years old, and he must pass a medical examination before he can secure a licence. At twenty-one he goes into the army. After that he must find some other occupation. Tiny boys of three or four are seen in some boats, and the divers like to give the impression that these shivering nippers are ready to go after the money. “Small boy dive, sare-t’row shillin’ for small boy!” But the

small boy does not dive. He is there as bait, and the big fellow recovers your penny every time.

Between the wars, when the Union-Castle mail boats reached Madeira at dawn, I used to take the private motor-launch direct to the steps of one of the most charming hotels in the world.

I would ride up the face of a cliff in a lift and walk through the famous garden to the breakfast room. This volcanic isle is bursting with food, and I have a memory of the fruit they put before me at breakfast; everything from grenadillas to custard apples, melons and grapes. I looked out over the blaze of hibiscus to the bathing places and the people lying on sunny terraces. One day, I said to myself, one day I will abandon my own beach for a time and stay at this hotel and see what else it can provide.

So now it is Reid’s Hotel again. Not the cheapest hotel on the island by any means. (At one time it was styled Reid’s Palace Hotel.) Not expensive either, yet certainly one of the world’s great hotels, ranking with the Shepherd’s I knew and other caravanserais favoured by novelists as backgrounds for their romantic imaginings.



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The story of the Reids of Reid's Hotel is a drama in which a long period of success had a sad ending. William Reid was a shrewd Scot who settled with his family in Funchal more than a century ago. Soon he was making a fortune in the hotel trade.

He bought one hotel and built another. English invalids were starting to pour into this island in the sun. My old guide book published seventy years ago shows that at that time he was the proprietor of the Santa Clara, described as the hotel par excellence, charging from eight shillings a day upwards. (Those were the days.) His second-best hotel was the Carmo, near the English Club; and he also owned the Deutsches Hotel Hortas, with catering "equal to a first-class hotel in Germany".

William Reid's final enterprise, in 1890, was the purchase of the ground where Reid's Hotel now stands. Many of you know this unforgettable site on a cliff overlooking the ocean; a cliff hung and festooned according to the season with brick-red or deep magenta bougainvillea, flaming orange bignonia or purple wisteria. Whenever a crack appears in the cliffs, giant agaves rear their flowerheads like aloes; and here, too, are prickly pears and the blue spikes called Pride of Madeira.

These cliffs are washed by the sea, and you dive from the flat rocks at the base into clear, deep water. Beachcombers in Madeira find themselves searching in vain for sand beaches, but the sun-warmed rocks are not to be despised.

Reid started building the palatial hotel which others have enlarged from time to time. He kept the Villa Victoria close by for summer guests, and opened everything for the winter season. There were no refrigerators in Madeira last century, yet Reid had a cold storage system. He filled a cave in the high Pico Arreiro with ice and snow during the winter. Every day in summer his men brought down blocks of ice to keep the food fresh and cool the drinks at Reid's Palace, and that was a luxury indeed.

William Reid died early this century, leaving the flourishing business to his sons William and Alfred. They managed Reid's Hotel until the end of World War I, when an English company bought it for £100,000. Some unambitious men like myself would have been content with a good round sum like that. Unfortunately the Reids wanted a larger fortune. They invested in a concession for a gambling casino in Funchal and lost every penny they and their father had made. So the Reid brothers

ended their days in poverty, living in a tiny cottage on the hillside above the scenes of their vanished glory.

Reid's Hotel became a huge place between the wars. It had to close down early in World War II, for ships avoid Madeira in wartime; and it remained closed for ten long years. Soon after the reopening in December, 1949, the British Consul in Madeira wrote to his friend Winston Churchill suggesting that the island would be a good spot for a holiday with a box of paints. Churchill sailed, having kept the *Durban Castle* waiting for him at Southampton while he fed his swans. Madeira gave him a rapturous welcome. The poor islanders are inclined to spend rather too much money on fireworks, and on this occasion the town became a sheet and fountain of gorgeous flame.

Churchill stayed at Reid's, in a suite Lloyd George had occupied nearly thirty years previously. There was not a double-bed in the hotel up to that time, but the manager had studied Churchill's whims and installed one for him. Reid's has a noble wine cellar including many champagnes; but Churchill followed his custom and brought his own very old yellowish Pol Roger. It was too cold for him to

swim that January. Nevertheless, he painted his famous Camara de Lobos canvas and went for several drives in spite of rain. Churchill had to cut his holiday short owing to the unexpected general election. "He roared like a lion for a flying boat and went off smoking a cigar at daybreak," a British resident told me. "But the news and pictures of that short visit went round the world and put Madeira back on the tourist map."

Churchill's visit was something of an ordeal for Reid's staff. He arrived only a fortnight after the hotel had been reopened, and the great machine was still gathering momentum after that decade of idleness. This great building, with its red, white and green facade, holds nearly two hundred guests. It must be worth half a million pounds. The new bar, a place of splendour, has panelling that cost a fortune; and it was designed specially so that the long windows frame the harbour view and the terraces of Funchal all the way to the cliffs of Garajau. If this is not the finest hotel bar in the world it must be among the first three.

Here it was that Churchill called for the oldest Madeira wine in the hotel, and the 1792 vintage was placed before his party. The old wine-lover was

almost overcome with emotion. He rose and exclaimed: "Ladies and gentlemen, this is a great moment. Here is a famous wine made on this island. Just think of it – a wine made more than a century and a half ago, three years after the French revolution, a wine to be treated with the respect it deserves." Churchill then flung a napkin over his arm and poured out the wine himself for every guest.

If you examine the old visitors' books at Reid's you will find the name of Cecil Rhodes in the early pages. George Bernard Shaw loved the bathing, and he also learnt to dance when Max Rinder was at the hotel as a professional teacher. Shaw gave Rinder a signed portrait inscribed: "To the only man who ever taught me anything. G.B.S."

Ten gardeners keep the acres of tropical growths at Reid's in order. It was a terraced vineyard when Reid bought it, and he tore out the vines and started planting the cabbage palms, aloes, daisy-trees, the plumbago hedges, roses and other growths which make this garden a jungle of flowers. Someone planted the kaffirboom from South Africa, and also the clumps of the Natal species of amaryllis with spikes of white flower-heads flushed with pink.

Madeira and Portugal supply almost the entire staff at Reid's, with a few key men from other countries. The head waiter and head barman are Italians, the chef is French, and a "brigade" (as hoteliers say) of French and Italian chefs reinforce the fulltime staff during the winter season. I have not forgotten the manager. The moment I saw this slim, inconspicuous yet distinguished Swiss in the closely-fitting cream dinner-jacket I knew that I had met him before. Sure enough he was Foerster of Shephard's, manager during World War II and afterwards, until that "Black Saturday" in 1952 when the most famous hotel in the world was burnt by the senseless mob. Mr. Foerster has brought the Shephard's touch to Madeira. I noticed similarities in the menus. Afternoon tea in the lounge, the stately afternoon tea of the English, was done in the same way; the procession of waiters with impeccable trays of tea and hot buttered toast, bread and butter and cakes.

Shephard's contrived to serve the most enjoyable open-air dinners in the world. Reid's provides an open pavilion above the bathing-rocks for breakfast and lunch, with music at lunch. I was listening happily to this orchestra one day – a beachcomber

on velvet – when I became aware of a scene of much colour and beauty. Between the pillars of the pavilion sat a slender girl with dark hair, dark blue jersey and red striped dress; and on her table stood a bottle of golden wine. In the harbour, between the old fort on Loo rock and the cliff, lay a white Danish barque which the cadets had brought almost to the anchorage under sail. Red roofs, green crops everywhere, running down to the blue sea. And finally, on my own table, an assortment of hors-d'oeuvres fit for a still life painting: yellow mayonnaise on the fish, beetroot, sliced tomato, green and black olives, tunny, meat salad, Russian salad.

Chefs at Reid's make good use of the island foods, the excellent fish and fine poultry and vegetables. If you wish to try a Portuguese dish, ask the head waiter and you will see what they can do with octopus, fish stews, pork, savoury rice, "rosbif" which has been marinaded and larded, rubbed with garlic and flavoured with herbs. It is as a *doceira*, a sweet-maker, however, that the Portuguese chef is at his best. Candied fruits and marzipan are greatly to the taste of all the Portuguese peoples, and much use is made of almond paste. It is also worth

remembering that a bad cup of coffee is practically unknown under the Portuguese flag.

Mr. Graham Blandy, a director of Reid's Hotel, shipping agent and wine expert, a versatile man with many business interests in Madeira, a man with a fine library and many hobbies, answered most of the questions I put to him about the island. Mildred, his South African wife, drove me through the vineyards and the entrancing countryside, and she gave me the feminine view of the island she has come to love.

No doubt you have noticed the headquarters bearing the sign "Blandy Brothers" on the Funchal waterfront. This firm has been established for so long, and has had so many activities, that the name of Blandy has become synonymous with Madeira. It is as well to remember, however, that no foreigner has a word to say in the government of Madeira. It is the same strict yet benevolent dictatorship as that of Portugal. A foreigner may run an hotel, but the government fixes the tariff.

Britons and other foreigners have done a great deal for Madeira. Hand-made embroidery was started over a century ago by Mrs Phelps, and it has kept

thousands of poor island girls from starvation. William Hinton and James Taylor were the wicker-work pioneers, and for eighty years Madeira chairs have been seen on Cape stoeps. Hinton is also a great name in the Madeira sugar industry. The cane grown nowadays came from Natal .

Veitch, the British Consul early last century, introduced apples and pears; he also left a host of proud descendants who still bear his name. Strawberries, for which Madeira is noted, were first grown by Miss Sheffield, a boarding-house keeper. Major Bulkeley designed the first bullock *carro* for his non-athletic wife; and now every true tourist must be photographed in one of these sledges running over the cobblestones. French Huguenots, the Cossarts, helped to build up the Madeira wine trade; so did the Gordons from Scotland, and the Duffs, Rutherfords, Miles, Powers, Drurys, Leacocks and others. At no time has the ordinary British colony in Madeira exceeded one thousand people, and now there are only two hundred and fifty. Few of the old British firms have survived. But the Blandys are there, and members of the Leacock and Miles families.

John Blandy, founder of the Blandy dynasty in

Madeira, was a British Army quartermaster who joined the garrison during the 1801-09 occupation and left the army to start his own business. Little is known of John Blandy, though his descendants have searched the records for details. He lived to the age of seventytwo, shipping wine to London and carrying on a profitable coaling business when the early steamers called at the island.

Blandy's wines of Madeira had a great reputation in England a hundred years ago. John Blandy's son Charles Ridpath was also a shrewd buyer, and the stocks he built up during the phylloxera blight proved of the utmost value later. He subsidised growers while the vineyards were being replanted and set a fine example of courage in adversity until the tide of public opinion again turned in favour of Madeira wines. At the time of Charles Blandy's death the wine he had bought for the firm was valued at two hundred thousand pounds. Those were the days when Madeira was not only a wine but a medicine, the great remedy for dyspepsia.

J. B. Blandy, grandson of the founder, retired from the firm in 1865, settled on the Berea in Durban and started a corn mill. Four of his children were born there. After this enterprise in early Natal he

returned to Madeira and built up the firm there and at Las Palmas.

Blandys organised regular coasting services in the 'eighties of last century, and their little steamers served the island well until roads were built. In that period, too, the firm bought the famous American clipper *Red Jacket* as a coal hulk. This was the ship that crossed the Atlantic more than a century ago in thirteen days, when steamers were taking longer. *Red Jacket* also sailed from Liverpool to Sydney in sixty-nine days. On three occasions she exceeded four hundred miles a day – a sailing ship of last century, moving faster than many steamers of the atomic age. *Red Jacket* was driven ashore in a gale after two years as a coal hulk, and she became a total loss. Fortunately the Blandys had removed the figurehead. Other relics of the historic ship have been preserved on the island.

Small wooden schooners brought coal to Madeira last century, and some were purchased by the Blandys for use as lighters. One lighter was sunk by the Germans during the attack on Funchal in 1916, and several were lost in the disastrous hurricane ten years later. Besides the *Red Jacket*, the firm bought *La Hogue* and *European* as coal hulks; great names

in the world of sailing ships.

For many years Blandy lighters supplied ships with water from the old spring under the Governor's palace. The firm also owned a *levada* system (which I shall describe later) supplying irrigation water for part of the island.

Among the distinguished visitors to Madeira who married into the Blandy family was the scientist Sir William Thompson, afterwards Lord Kelvin. He carried out some of his research work at Funchal, and used the Loo rock for tidal measurements.

"Grabham of Madeira" married Miss Mary Blandy. This English doctor sailed to Funchal in a two-hundred ton brig soon after he had qualified in 1861, and became one of the personalities of the island. He was a botanist, gardener, and authority on the natural history of the island. As a result of his medical articles, sufferers from tuberculosis and other invalids flocked to Madeira. Dr. Michael Grabham had a weakness for clocks. His collection of two hundred included a full-sized church clock. Another large clock had a sixteen-foot pendulum. And these varied specimens were not mere show-pieces. He wound them meticulously and kept them

all in working order. Dr. Grabham was a hospitable man, but his guests found the loud chiming and striking of so many clocks at night difficult to tolerate. The owner seemed to be unaware of the noise. Yet he was a musician, a church organist who had played at St. Paul's in London. When he died in 1935 at the age of ninety-five the *London Times* declared: " Dr. Grabham was Madeira. Certainly the island had no more beloved figure or more influential personality." Think of him when you lunch in the open air in that pavilion over the rocks at Reid's; for the red-tiled bungalow where they cook your lunch was Dr. Grabham's home.

Probably the finest private estate in the whole of Madeira is the Quinta do Palheiro, home of Mr. and Mrs Graham Blandy. It is really a farm of eight hundred acres with a celebrated garden; a place of such botanical interest that Smuts made for it the moment he landed at Funchal. (During other visits he walked into the wilder parts of the island to study the grasses.) Rhodes was entertained here; Hertzog and Sir Patrick Duncan knew these magnificent lawns. South Africans are at home immediately among the silver trees and proteas.

Mr. J. B. Blandy bought the Quinta do Palheiro some years after his return from Natal. For more than seventy years the estate has been in the possession of the Blandy family. It is eighteen hundred feet above sea level, too high for the main crops of Madeira-sugar cane, bananas and vines – but excellent for vegetables, citrus fruits, strawberries, wheat, maize and barley. In the garden of thirty acres you find cedars from Nyasaland, arums in profusion, thousands of camellia trees of the loveliest species, large sequoias, groups of magnolias, pines from Norfolk Island, the Himalayas and the Canaries, rock gardens filled with South African flowers; babianas, ixias, mesembryanthemums and many more. Here, too, you can see Madeira's own trees; the lily-of-the-valley tree, the dragon tree, giant heath, Madeira holly and island ebony.

Don Carlos I, the King of Portugal who was assassinated half a century ago, attended a picnic given by the Blandys on this estate when he and his queen visited Madeira. Don Carlos rode up from Funchal on horseback while the queen arrived in a bullock sledge. The king played tennis in his waistcoat, smoking a cigar.

Wild peacocks fly over the Quinta do Palheiro, gorgeous cousins of the turkey. They are shot occasionally, for the young birds are palatable when larded and roasted like turkey, with the island chestnuts for stuffing.

This great estate depends for water (like most of Madeira) on the *levada* system of watercourses which I have mentioned. South African farmers calling at Madeira have always been fascinated by the *levadas*, with their great possibilities for disputes. Settlers have been building *levadas* for five hundred years, however, and the intricate system does carry the water to where it is needed. Each *levada* taps a source of water in the remote mountains and a clear-cut channel takes it by gentle gradients over distances as great as seventy miles from the springs. The *levadas* pass through tunnels and over various properties; landowners must allow the passage of water where necessary. Some *levadas* are owned by the government, others by companies. Water is sold by the hour.

I, who have no head for heights, was horrified to find that many *levadas* were carried along the faces of precipices. Some were hewn out of the rock. Others were built of stone and cement, with a

narrow path alongside for those who keep the system in repair. Now these *levada* paths have become shortcuts from village to village. Adventurous visitors who trust themselves to the narrow paths find that the *levadas* take them into the most stupendous scenery on earth; virgin forests and isolated valleys, peaks and waterfalls. The *levadas* are to the hardened mountaineer, pure joy. Those who dislike a sheer drop of hundreds of feet must keep to the ordinary paths. I found a *levada* walk in the Ribeiro Frio region where the ground sloped away at a reasonable angle. It was one of the most inspiring and memorable walks I have ever taken in my life. Nowhere else that I know is there the same queer sensation of being poised between heaven and earth.

It was at the Quinta do Palheiro that Graham Blandy gave me a glass of one of the oldest wines in the world. He told me the great story and refilled my glass with that magnificent Madeira wine. I regard that as one of the experiences of a varied life, and I am grateful.

The story? First you must know that Madeira wine is unlike any other wine on earth, and that it probably owes its character to a fire. Zarco, the

discoverer and first governor of Madeira, took it into his head to clear the island for settlement by setting the forests alight. He destroyed much grand timber and the trees blazed for seven years. But when Zarco died in the middle of the fifteenth century, vineyards were flourishing on the ash and leaf mould of the vanished forests.

English merchants who settled in Madeira three centuries ago shipped the wine away. Some of their vessels sailed from Madeira to India and then to England; and when the shippers met their ships and tasted the wine in England they found it had improved almost miraculously during the voyage. Other wines suffered or were spoilt in the tropics. Yet it soon became known that this strange and lovely Madeira wine positively demanded a long, hot voyage to bring out its inherent charm. To this day no one can explain the mystery.

“Wine is a living thing,” one expert in Funchal reminded me. “You have to cherish it as you would an infant – or an old man. I cannot explain why Madeira wine should live for ever, but it is almost true to say that it does. Zarco’s fire must have had something to do with it. I believe the combination of ash and the volcanic origin of the island produce

a wine with a personality found only in Madeira. It is the soil, the richest soil on earth.”

So I was privileged to enter the cellar in the Blandy home where Graham Blandy selected a bottle of 1792 Madeira. It was a Bual which had known more adventures than most bottles of wine. I sat entranced both with the story my host told me and with the dark, sweet magic of the wine itself.

This very wine was sold to Napoleon when he called at Madeira on his way into exile at St. Helena. Veitch, the British Consul, arranged for the pipe of wine, more than one hundred gallons, to be supplied. Napoleon also ordered some books and fruit, and paid for these in golden napoleons. (When the English Church was built not long afterwards these coins were placed in the foundation stone.) Owing to an oversight, however, no one paid for the wine. Veitch, who took the responsibility, managed to recover the unconsumed portion of the wine from St. Helena after Napoleon’s death. He sold it to Mr. Charles Blandy and many years afterwards it came into the possession of Dr. Michael Grabham, who left some of the historic bottles of 1792 Bual to Graham Blandy and his brother John. As a wine lover I can say truthfully that it was worth going to

Madeira for that wine alone. What a legacy!

Two years before his death Dr. Grabham entertained the French connoisseur, M. Andre Simon, and brought out the 1792 wine for the occasion. "It was authentic, perfect as regards colour, bouquet and flavour, but even more remarkable, if possible, on account of its pedigree," Simon recorded. And it was still perfect on that October evening in 1956 when I raised the wonderful Bual reverently to my lips.

Down in Funchal I met another wine expert, Mr. Horace Zino, and tasted other fine old Madeira wines. Mr. Zino presides over the Madeira Wine Association, occupying a quaint old building with a courtyard near the public gardens. An old alleyway is embodied in the premises, another part was once a convent, the ceiling timbers came from wrecked ships, and the whole place is an abode of fragrance and beauty. In one room, for example, you see hundreds of bottles covered with the most artistic wickerwork in the world. It may put a shilling on the price, but those bottles are treasured in many homes. In another room Mr. Zino explained the modern heat treatment which imparts the same qualities to the wine as the long tropic voyages in

the hot bilges of sailing ships. The temperature rises gradually by central heating from zero to one hundred and forty degrees Fahrenheit, and the wine improves mysteriously.

I saw many demijohns of century-old wine in those cellars. The casks were of oak or Brazilian satinwood, and banana skins were used to cover the bungs. Four wine tasters work in this building, to see that each blend or solera is up to standard. "But you have to be in the mood for wine-tasting," remarked Mr. Zino. "Then it is wonderful how the expert opinions agree. Four men award marks to each wine secretly and they arrive at very much the same conclusions before they compare notes."

Half the wine grapes grown in Madeira are still trodden by human feet. Much of the wine comes to the cellars in goatskins, or in barrels on ox-drawn sledges. After all, why interfere with a success in the name of progress?

Mr. Zino took me into the huge room decorated like an inn, where many thousands of ships' passengers visiting Madeira are entertained every year. (Do not miss this treat next time you land in Funchal.) You can have as much wine as you care to drink free of



Half the wine grapes grown in Madeira are still trodden by human feet. Much of the wine comes to the cellars in goatskins.

charge, and miniature bottles are given away. Madeira wine falls into four classes. There is the Sercial, a bone dry wine produced mainly on the ledges above Camara de Lobos. White grapes of Riesling origin are used. It is a fine appetiser, and it tastes superb with a cheese souffle. The output of this aristocratic wine is small. Then the Verdelho, pressed from the pallid grape of the same name, a fairly dry wine, excellent with soup. Some connoisseurs regard this as the most elegant of all the Madeiras. Bual, with a sweetness that varies according to the ideas of different firms, is a wine for all occasions. Finally there is the celebrated Malmsey, made from the Malvasia grape, full and luscious, one of the great dessert wines of the world.

Mr. Zino is proud of his old *soleras*, his 1808 Malmsey, his 1826 Bual and his large stock of 1862 wine from the black Terrantez grape, made before the disastrous odium fungus wiped out so many vineyards. His oldest wine, from Camara de Lobos, goes back to 1775. A wine of 1795 was beginning to ebb, but the tasters discovered the gradual fading process before it had passed its prime. "There was not much left, so we drank it," remarked Mr. Zino

with satisfaction.

What shall I remember now that I know Madeira a little better? I recall the English Church in Funchal, a circular hall without steeple or bells, a puzzle to many visitors. It was built during an intolerant period when only Roman Catholic churches were allowed to follow the normal church designs. Protestants and other non-Catholics who died in Madeira in the eighteenth century had to be buried at sea, as there was no cemetery for them.

A partner in the firm of Gordon Duff and Company was opposed to sea burial. When he was on his death bed he asked a member of the firm to bury him under his old desk in the Funchal office. This last wish was carried out. Late last century, when the office was being altered, the skeleton was found under the flagstones.

You know my fondness for markets. I shall remember the fish market at Funchal because of the great assortment on the slabs. Fish coloured like ocean humming-birds. Blood-red tunny, which the Portuguese call *voador*. The great red scorpion fish known as *carneiro*; the *chicbarro* or horse-mackerel; the electric-blue *dourado*, tinged with gold; the

grotesque but appetising soldier fish; the tasty rabbit fish; the Madeira whiting; and of course the espada. Madeira loves the espada, and it is often served in Union Castle mailships. It is a line fish, caught at a depth of three thousand feet or more – the deepest food fish in the world, I imagine. Each line has a couple of hundred baited hooks, and a fisherman expects to haul up about fifty espada at a time. A queer-looking fish is the espada, rather like a long black eel with huge eyes. Its English name is the scabbard-fish, and you might imagine it as a sheath for a sword. But when you taste it as the chefs at Reid's and in the mail ships prepare it, then indeed you have a delicacy from the depths.

Ships' passengers seldom glimpse the lonely places of Madeira. You might think that an island of only two hundred and forty square miles could have few remote corners. Drive up the sensational road to the Gran Curral, a gigantic bowl hemmed in by volcanic peaks, and you will believe your guide when he tells you that some of the people in those distant, inaccessible fastnesses have never been to town. I shall remember the mountains, the Pico Arierio, the Balcoes, and Santo da Serra, and the

terrifying levadar, the ravines and chasms that can be reached only on foot.

Strange to say, I shall also recall, as clearly as modern Madeira, the Madeira I saw as a youth. The shop where I bought a pretty little miniature mandoline of tortoiseshell. The hotel at Monte, with an orchestra playing at breakfast, after the ride in the funicular railway which has been torn up. The polite straw-hatted pimp on the mole who always assured passengers returning to the ship that there was still plenty of time. (He seems to have gone on pension.) I remember, too, an incident which I did not care to recall while I was staying on the island – the so-called “Battle of Funchal” in 1919, which Deneys Reitz described. I was among the troops involved in that brush with the gendarmes. Madeira has many links with South Africa, though trade is not what it was. Fifty years ago the Union-Castle ships carried vast deck cargoes of eggs in baskets from Funchal to the Cape. Nowadays many shopkeepers and others depend very largely on the money spent by ships' passengers. Hundreds of these islanders have settled in the Union, of course; some as fishermen at the Cape, others as market gardeners on the Rand, and a number as Rand

miners. They are clever at dry wall construction, and this type of skill is in demand underground, where there is much waste to be packed away.

One link with South Africa that concerns me now is the southbound mailship. Tomorrow afternoon the *Winchester Castle* will anchor in the bay, and while her passengers are riding the cobblestones in *carros* and toboggans I shall be unpacking my suitcases in my single-berth cabin. It is a comforting thought. I am an incorrigible traveller, but there comes a time when I must pause and reflect. Then I am ready for the voyage back to my beach, the Blaauwberg beach, the dunes, the mussels and the gulls.

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Chavonnes battery
Clams
Clan Monroe (Ship)
Clan Stuart (Ship)

Clarence Bay
Clifton
Cockburn (Hulk)
Coffee Bay
H. T. Colebrooke
Comfort Cove
Comfortless Cove
Constable Hill
Harry Claude Cooper
Sir George Cory
Crabs
Crawfish
Cross Hill
Cutty Sark (Clipper)
Dageraad (Fish)
(Commodore) James
Dagleish
William Dampier
Dampier's Cave

Dampier's Springs
Danger Bay
Danger Point
Dassen Island
Dawidskraal (Betty's Bay)
Mrs D. J. De Villiers
Dead Man's Cove
Pierre-Antoine Delalande
Devil's Ashpit
Devil's Punchbowl
Devil's Riding School
Mrs D. E. Dewar
Dikkop
Diving boys
Doctor's Cave
Dogfish
Dolphins
Doncaster (Barque)
Donkergat

Sir Rufane Donkin	H.M.S. Frolic	Harders
Drosters	Gale of 1865	H. G. Harraway
James Drury	Galjoen	Herold's Bay
Egrets	Geelbek	Hérons
Elf	Geelbek (Farm)	Hoedjies Point
Hans Ellefsen	Gentoo (Ship)	Holloway's Inn
Commandant P. Eloff	Georgetown	Robert Holmes
Emden (Cruiser)	Mrs Gill	H. Charteris Hooper
Emu Rock	Gomera	Hope (Schooner)
False Bay	Gordon's Bay	Humpback whales
Fish	Captain Robert Granger	Professor W. E. Isaac
Fish names	Gray's beaked whale	Ismore (Troopship)
Flamingos	Green Mountain	James Searle (Tug)
Food at sea	Green Point	Jeffrey's Bay
Vernon S. Forbes	E. L. Grigg	Jelly fish
Formosa Bay	Grosvenor treasure	Jim Crow Rock
Dr. F. W. Fox	Gulls	Hans Jorgensen
Frieda Woermann (Steamer)	Gunner's Quoin	Joseph (Fish)
Frigate-bird	Hangklip	Dr. C. F. Juritz

Kakapo (Wreck)	Malkopsvlei	Oatlands
Kalk Bay	Manta rays	Octopus
Kayser's Beach	Marra	Olifantsbos
Killer whales	Angus McCallum	Captain Morch Olsen
H. J. Koch	Meeuw Island	Oni (Russian barque)
La Louette (Wreck)	John X. Merriman	Oostenwal
Lambert's Bay	Sir Henry Middleton	Oste (Brigantine)
Land-crabs	Miller's Point	Oudekraal
Langebaan	Moordenaars Poort	Owen Bay
C. J. Lawrence	Mossel Bay	John Owen
Layard's beaked whale	Mostert's Bay	Captain W. F. W. Owen
Leprosy	Mouille Point	Oysters
Lighthouses	Muizenberg	Duarte Pacheco
Jan Linde	John Murray	Palmiet River
Sir Hudson Lowe	Murray's Bay	Pansy Beach
Ludwig Wiener (Tug)	Mussels	Paternoster
Madeira	Namaqualand coast	Pearls
Madeira wine	Napoleon	Pelicans
Malagas Island	Dr. E. A. Nobbs	Dr. L. A. Peringuey

Perlemoen
Petrels
Pico Formosa
Pieter Faure (Steamer)
Pillar Bay
Plettenberg Bay
Plovers
Point Durnford
Pondoland
Porpoises
Port Alfred
Port Nolloth
Port St. Johns
E. J. Prillevitz
Pringle Bay
Dr. J. A. Pringle
Protea (Survey ship)
Protea Rock
Pumice Cove

Pygmy right whale
Pygmy sperm whale
Queen of the Thames
(Steamer)
Quinta do Palheiro
Quoin Point
Red-bait
Riet Vlei
Right whales
Robben Island
Robbensteen Island
Robberg
Rogge Bay
Rondeberg breaker
Rozette (Brig)
Saldanha Bay
Sandwich Harbour
Sao Goncalo (Galleon)
Sardinia Bay
Scabbard fish

Schapen Island
Advocate S. Schoeman
Schoonberg (Wreck)
Herman Schutte
Professor E. H. L. Schwarz
Sea shells
Sea urchins
Seabirds
Seals
Seaweed
Sei whales
Sharks
Sheik Joseph
Shipwrecks
Simon's Bay
Simonstown
Sir Charles Elliott (Tug)
Sirkels Vlei
E. J. Smith
Smitswinkel Bay

Smoky Cape	Thunderbolt Reef	Waterloo (Convict ship)
Commandant A. Smorenburg	Tijuca (Barque)	Whale Rock
Snoek	Tobacco Bay	Whaling
Sperm whales	Treasure	Whistling language
St. Helena	Treasure Beach	Wideawake Fair
St. Helena Bay	Lieut.-Colonel H. F. Trew	Wideawakes
Frikkie Stadler	Tunny	Wild Coast
Miss Edith L. Stephens	Turtles	Yellow fever
Sting-rays	Lieut.-Col. W. H. Turton,	Yselstein Bay
Storm petrels	D.S.O.	Zoetendal's Vlei
A. E. Strange	Undine (Steam Trawler)	
Struys Bay	Vasco da Gama Peak	
Sunfish	Captain Alexander Vidal, R.N	
Swordfish	Von Mollendorf	
Table Bay Docks	Vondeling Island	
Telegraph (schooner)	Voyages	
Terns	Vulcan Rock	
Terra dos Fumos	Waenhuiskrans	
Terra Fragosa	Walsh Brothers	